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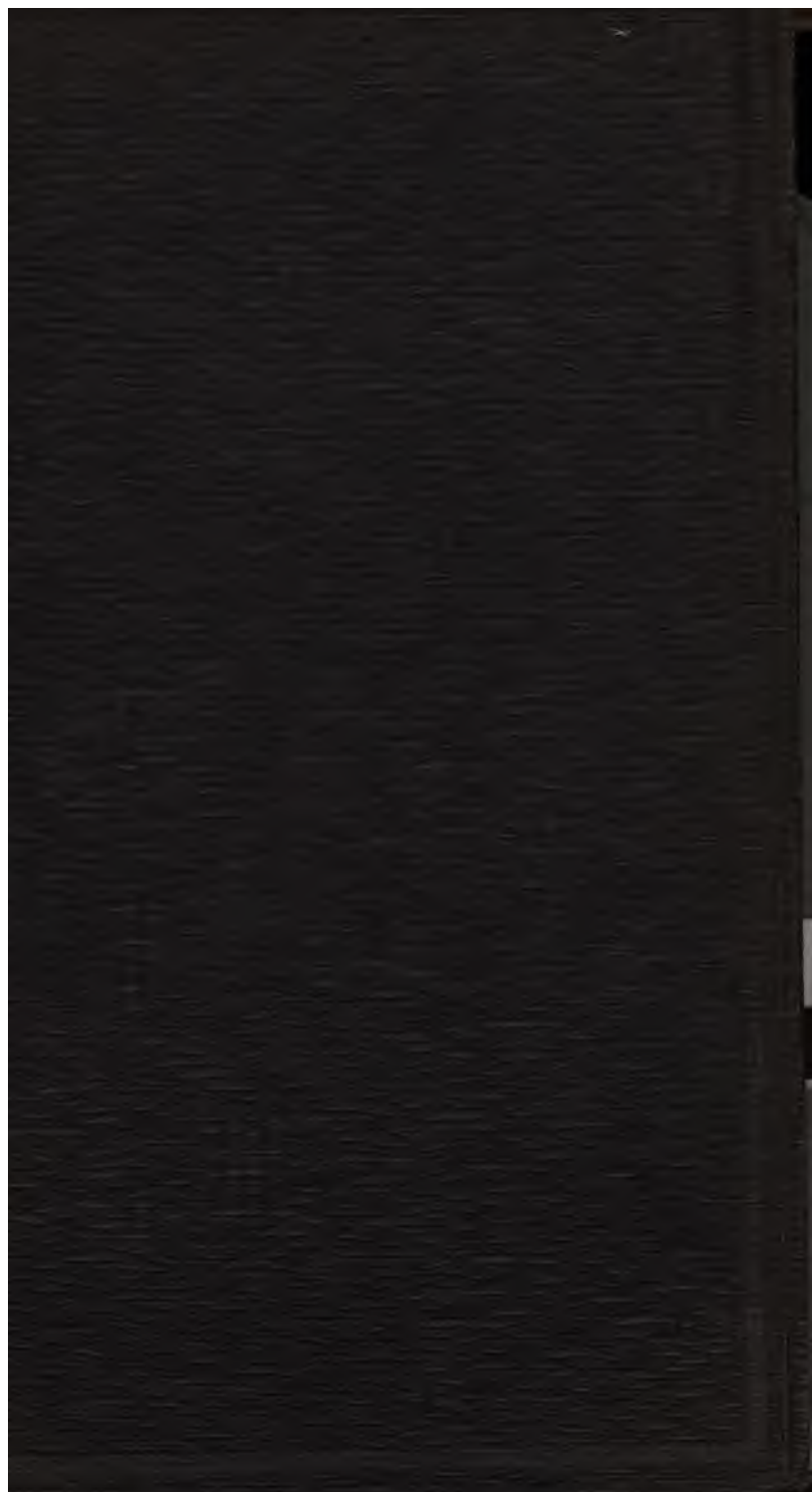
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THE DAYS OF MY LIFE.

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

"MARGARET MAITLAND," "LILLIESLEAF,"

&c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

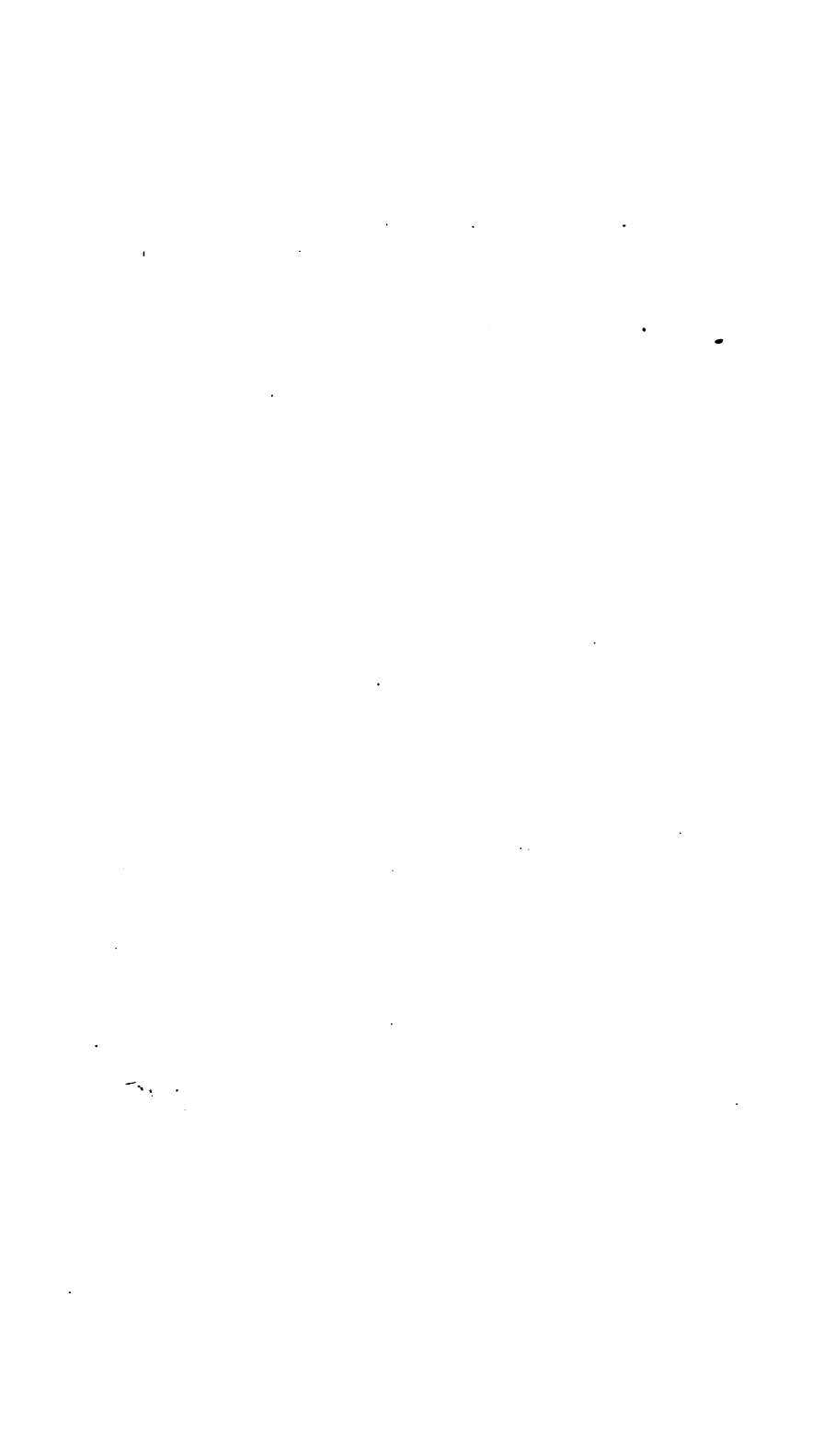
VOL. III.



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BOOK III.



THE
DAYS OF MY LIFE.

THE FIRST DAY.

It was a peaceful, solitary village; a cluster of houses gathered round one simple church, the tower of which was the central point in the quiet landscape. Behind it at some distance was a low hill—a very low hill—not much more than a mound—but with some dark Scotch firs upon it, which gave solidity to the thick plantation of lighter trees, not yet fully clothed. Behind the hill ran a railway, upon which a train appeared, while we watched, flaunting its white plume into the air, as it shrieked and rushed into the shadow.

The village itself was quite upon the water's edge, standing close by the shore of a blue quiet bay, looking over to the trees and green fields on the other side of the broad Thames. The place was a little below Gravesend, quite out of the fret and bustle of the narrower river, and there was not even a steamboat pier to disturb the quiet of this cluster of harmless houses, though they watched upon their beach the passage of great navies down the greatest thoroughfare of England. It looked so quiet, so primitive, so retired, with its few boats in its little bay, that you could not have fancied it so near the Babel of the world. The spring day was bright and calm; the river was stirred only by the great ripples of its current; the white sails of passing ships shone dazzling in the sunshine, and you could even catch a glimpse of the dancing motes of foam on the rougher sea-water, as it widened and widened downward to the ocean. Though there were few striking features in the landscape, it charmed me with its new and unaccustomed beauty. It

won my thoughts out of myself ; I was pleased to think of living here.

There was scarcely anything to be called an inn in Elith,—but as we had no other place to go, we went to the little humble house which bore the name, and were shown into a faded little parlour, where such visitors as we were seldom made their appearance, I suppose, and which was certainly adapted for very different guests. Alice was much more annoyed and disturbed than I was at coming here ; I am afraid she almost thought her respectability compromised by the glimpse we caught of the aborigines of the place, smoking long pipes and drinking beer as we came in—and she was nervous and reluctant to be seen at the window, whither I had gone immediately, to look out upon this wonderful elysium of water and sunshine ; there seemed to me the strangest silent ecstasy in those ships, their sails rounded with the slight wind, and shining with such an intense whiteness in the sunshine against the blue river and the bluer sky. They seemed to

be gliding on in a dream—in a rapture—and my mind glided on with them, for the moment satisfied and at rest.

But I had now everything to think of—everything to arrange. Alice had lived at home so long, and had been so undisturbed in her daily duties, that she was not at all fit for this emergency—she was quite ready to *do* everything, but she depended entirely on me to be told what she should do; so I asked the country girl who attended us if there were any houses to be let in the village, and she answered me eagerly and immediately in a somewhat lengthy speech, intimating that this was scarce the season yet, but that “a many families” came from town for the beautiful air here, and that she knew of a widow lady who had a furnished house to let, and wanted badly to have it off her hands. The girl was quite anxious to be the negotiator in the possible bargain—should she run and let the lady know?—would I have her come to me? or would I please go to the cottage? and we immediately had an inventory

of its furniture and decorations, of which Alice, I could perceive, was somewhat contemptuous. But I had a fancy, newly acquired, about our mode of living here ; I determined on making no pretence or attempt to live such a life as I had hitherto done. I had separated myself from my rank and my home ; I still wanted hardships, privations, toils, if they were possible, and I had made up my mind ; so I took Alice's arm to support me, for I was very much fatigued, and we went out together, conducted by our zealous attendant, to see the house.

It was a little square, two-storied house, standing by itself on a little grassy knoll, at one side of the village ; the small inclosure in front was but two strips of bare grass, with fantastic flower-beds cut in the turf, divided by a paved path leading to the door. There were no flowers, but only a shabby little evergreen in each of the mounds of soil, and the front of the house was festooned with ragged garlands of the "traveller's joy," a favourite creeper, as it seemed, in this neighbourhood. The door opened into

a little narrow passage, terminating in a steep flight of stairs, and with a door on either side—the little parlour and the little kitchen of this “genteel” little house. The “widow lady” made her appearance, somewhat fluttered, for we had disturbed her at dinner, and I do not think she was quite pleased with her zealous friend, the maid at the inn, for revealing to strangers the table spread in the kitchen, and the careless morning toilette, which was only intended for the sanctity of her own retirement. The parlour, into which she ushered us with pride, was a little stifling apartment, with Venetian blinds closed over its little window, so as scarcely to leave one row of panes uncovered; it was very fine with a red and blue carpet, an elaborate composition of coloured paper in the grate, and little flower vases filled with *immortelles* and dried grass, reflecting themselves in the little dark-complexioned mirror. There was a small cheffonier in one corner, a haircloth sofa, and a round table, with sundry books displayed upon it—and the “widow lady” exhibited

the room which was her pride and crowning glory with evident satisfaction. Alice looked upon all with a discontented eye—this homely finery made no impression upon her—for Alice could not be persuaded that I was a voluntary exile and outcast; she could be reconciled to my leaving home, but she could not reconcile herself to any descent in rank. I was still Mrs Southcote of Cottiswoode, to Alice.

Upstairs there were two bed-rooms, and no more; one very white and in good order, with dimity hangings, and carefully polished furniture; the other with no hangings at all, and not much furnishing to boast of; and these, with the kitchen, made all the house.

Alice looked in my face anxiously, "You never can live in this little place, dear? What could you do here?" cried Alice. "Miss Hester, you won't think of it; there's no accommodation for a lady here."

"There is quite enough for us two," I said. "I do not wish to live as we lived at home; I want to help myself with my own hands; I

want to live as your daughter might live, Alice ; I think this is very good—we do not want any more.”

Alice, for the moment, was almost impatient with me. “Do you mean to think you can live and sit all day in this little place?” she said, looking round upon the fine parlour ; “it’s sinful, Miss Hester—it is ! I’ll not give in to it. Do you think upon what’s coming, dear ? Well-a-day, that it should be coming now ! Do you think you can lie down upon that hard sofa, and put up with this place, after what you’ve been used to ?—it goes against my conscience—it’s sinful, Miss Hester !”

“And why, Alice ?” said I.

Alice found it difficult to answer why, but was not less positive on that account. “I don’t like it myself,” said Alice ; “I’ve not been used to it this many a day—but darling, you !”

“Alice, let us be humble—let us be quiet—let me have something to do,” I said earnestly. “We shall have nobody in the house but you and I. We will serve each other. We will do

everything with our own hands. Do not try to resist me, Alice ; I think I have a great deal to learn yet—I am not so proud as I was. Let me try what life is among poorer people—let me have my will, Alice.”

Alice made no further resistance. Her face was not so contented as usual—that was all—but now she made me sit down, and went to the kitchen herself to bargain with the landlady. I heard their voices immediately in audible parley. The widow was anxious to have her house taken for some fixed time ; while Alice, I could hear, was rather mysterious and lofty, and did not know how long her lady might be able to stay. Then there came an enquiry about my name, and something which sounded like a request for a reference, and Alice came abruptly back to me. I was sitting where she had left me, listening to their conversation, and she came close to my side, and stooped to whisper in my ear, “ What name shall I say, Miss Hester ? ”

“ What name ? ” did Alice mean to insult

me?" "My own proper name, of course," I said, with a little anger. "Why do you ask? Do you think I wish to conceal myself because I have left home? No, no, my own name."

"But the squire will be sure to find you, darling," said Alice, still whispering; "you don't think he'll be content and never make any search? and he'll soon find you if you always go by your own name."

"I will do nothing clandestine," I said, with displeasure; "nothing shall ever make me deny my name. No, Alice, we are not fugitives—we are not guilty—I fear no one finding me."

She went away after this without a word, and then the dialogue in the kitchen was resumed. Her lady was Mrs Southcote, a lady from Cambridgeshire, Alice said, and wanted quiet and fresh air for a time, though she could not tell how long; and then there were many curious questions about my health, and many inquiring hints as to my motive in coming here; but to all this Alice turned a deaf ear, and answered nothing. One thing she insisted upon

earnestly, and that was that we should have immediate possession. The widow demurred, but Alice carried her point, and came back to me triumphant, to tell me that we were to remain here, and have the house entirely to ourselves to-morrow. She commenced operations immediately to improve the appearance of the little parlour. She drew up the blinds, removed the lower one, opened the window—for the day was very warm—and began to tug the reluctant sofa out of its corner, to place it at the window for me. While she was so occupied, and while this crazy piece of furniture creaked and jolted on its way to its new position, I caught the anxious eye of the mistress of the house looking in at the door watching her proceedings. This good woman did not understand the shifting of her much-beloved and cherished furniture. The sofa was the true inhabitant of the room, while we were only strangers and sojourners; she came in with a half-courtesy to hint a remonstrance; she hoped I would not be offended; she had seen better

days, and never thought to be in her present position ; and her furniture—would I please to have it taken care of ? and then she went to offer her services to help Alice to lift the sofa, for it would tear her good carpet, she was most sure.

Alice did not receive this obliging offer with a very good grace ; I for my part looked on with quiet amusement ; I was astonished to find how much the novelty of all this lightened my mind, and relieved me from myself. I could not have believed when I left home twenty-four hours ago that anything would have brought a smile to my lips so soon ; yet so it was ; and when the widow went away, I took my place in a corner of the hard sofa, and looked out upon the river, with a dreamy ease and leisure at my heart which astonished me still more. Ship after ship, great and small—I could not tell one from another, nor had the slightest conception of any distinctions of class or name between them—went gliding downward, majestic with their full white sails and lofty masts, upon the current, which was flowing strongly to the sea. Little steamers

fumed and fretted upon the peaceful river, going up and down, and across—great ones came in, making a solemn rustle in the water with their unseen footsteps—little shadowy skiffs shot along like sea-birds on the top of the stream, and more substantial wherries, laden with parties of pleasure, now and then went by, keeping cautiously to the side of the river. The tide had ebbed a little from the stony beach of our small bay. A boat which had been floating an hour since, was now stranded on the shore. This was altogether new to me. I knew nothing, except words, of those mysterious ocean tides, nor of where they penetrated and where stayed. I watched the water gleaming further back at every ripple with a strange delight, watching and wondering how far back it would go, almost counting the soft peaceful waves. I looked anxiously out upon the course of the river, where those far away white specks were dancing on the roughened edge of the sea. I speculated on the voyages which these stately wayfarers were bound upon—I thought with a

shudder of the storm at sea which I had myself seen—and I was only roused from my pleasant occupation by the voice of Alice, as she stood behind me looking out also, but with different thoughts. “I warrant there’s many a pretty boy and many a child’s father in such great ships,” said Alice with a sigh; “they’re beautiful to look at, Miss Hester, but I had a deal rather see them coming home. Many a house will be dreary to-day for want of them that’s sailing there.”

I know well she did not mean to grieve me, but even while she spoke my burden came back; I looked after the ships with a wistful glance; yes, many a home had given its best beloved to those frail gallant ships, to risk the storms and the sea. Why? for duty and necessity, for daily bread, for honest labour; but what pretence had *I* for making *my* home desolate, or launching my poor boat upon this unknown sea of life? I had no answer to make; I had no resource but to turn my back upon the question, and ignore it. I turned from the window,

suddenly, and laid my head down upon the hard prickly hair-cloth cushion, and said I would rest a little. I was not quite so miserable even now as I had been yesterday, but my thoughts had returned to the same channel again.

As I thus reclined, sometimes watching her, sometimes seeing visions of Cottiswoode and of all the agitation and tumult which must be there, Alice came and went between this little room and the kitchen, and began to spread the table, and to prepare our early, humble dinner. It soothed me to see her making all those little simple arrangements—everything was so far removed from the more stately regulations of home—and there seemed to me such a comfort and privacy in thus being able to do without the intervention of servants—to do everything “for ourselves,” as I flattered myself. What a rest and deliverance to my overstrained mind would be the constant occupation which I must have had, had I really been the daughter of Alice! I thought of Amy’s cheerful bustle, of our simple maid Mary, singing at her work in my father’s house at Cam-

bridge ;—with tangible and real things in their hands and their thoughts all day long, what leisure could *they* have for the broodings of the mind diseased ?—what time for unprofitable self-communion ? Ah, now I thought of it, that sickening doubt of myself came over me again ; I was shaken in my false position ; and now, when I wanted the fullest confidence in myself and my course of action, my perverse heart began to glance back with dreadful suspicions of every step I had ever taken. I could no longer rest when this most ingenious process of self-torment began again. I had to rise and walk about, hurrying, as if to escape from it ; and I was glad and thankful when Alice came in again with our simple meal.

After we had dined, I went with her, glad to be kept in any way from my own sole company, to unpack our trunk upstairs. I took out the things I had been working at, and my materials, and when she was ready to go with me, I carried them down stairs. I would not go without Alice. I made her sit by me, and take her own

work, and be constantly at my side. By this time we had drawn a little table to the window for our sewing-things, and Alice sat opposite to me in a hard mahogany arm-chair, while I, half reclining on my sofa, went on slowly with my occupation. I was still busy with those delicate bits of embroidery, and I think almost the only pleasure I recollect in that dark time of my life was the progress I made with these. I was putting some of them together now—"making them up," as we called it in our woman's language. I had a great pride in my needlework, and there is always a pleasure in construction—so I was almost comfortable once more, and sometimes had such a thrill of strange delight at my heart, that it almost was a pang, mingled of pain and joy, to see the definite shape these fine delicate bits of cambric took under my fingers. All this while Alice sat by working at similar work, and telling me tales of young wives like myself, and of mothers and children, and of all the natural experiences of womanhood. Like myself ! with a shudder I wondered

within myself whether there was one other in the world like me.

After a while, when I wearied of this—as indeed in my present mood of mind and weakness of frame I soon wearied of anything, I made Alice get her bonnet and come out with me. It was now getting towards evening, and the usual hum of play and of rest which always is about a comfortable village after the day's work is over, was pleasantly audible here. At some distance from our house, behind it, some lads were playing cricket in a field, and women were gossiping at the cottage doors, and men lounging about—many of them in their blue woollen shirts and glazed hats, sailors, as we fancied in our ignorance—though they were in reality only watermen, who went a fishing sometimes, after a somewhat ignoble fashion, to the mouth of the river, and managed these pleasure-boats when they were at home. We wandered down close to the river, where the water now came rustling up to our feet, creeping closer and closer in every wave. “It is the tide,” said I, with involuntary reverence. Alice did

not know much about the tide, but her heart, like every other natural heart, was charmed by that liquid soft ringing music, the ripple of the water as it rose and fell upon the beach, and Alice was reverential too. I bent down myself like a child, to put my hand upon the pebbly wet line, and feel the soft water heaving up upon it, higher and higher. Ships were still passing down the beautiful calm river, gliding away silently into the night and the sea—the soft hum of the village was behind us, the musical cadence of these gentle waves filled the quiet air, yet soothed it, and we stood together, saying nothing, strangers and solitary, knowing Nature only—one of us knowing God—but strangers to all the human people here.

As we went back, many of the cottage doors were closed, and through some of the half-curtained windows we saw the humble little families gathered together for the night. From the church, as we passed, there came some sounds of music; the organist had been practising, I suppose—and the “linked sweetness long drawn out,” the

“dying fall,” which commands the imagination more entirely than anything perfect and completed can, was stealing into the darkening twilight as we passed by the half-open door. I cannot tell why all those sweet influences make even the happy pensive ; but I know they brought such heaviness to my heart, and such tears to my eyes, as I would not like to feel again. Alice did not say anything—perhaps she saw that I was crying; but I was very glad to get home, and lay myself down upon my bed, and seek the sleep which always mercifully came to me. How glad I was always to fall asleep ! no other way could I get rid of myself and my troubles ; they looked in upon me with my first waking in the unwelcome light of the morning—but I had oblivion in my sleep.

THE SECOND DAY.

WE were now in complete possession of our little solitary house ; our humble neighbours had become accustomed to us, and no longer clustered about their doors and talked in whispers when we came out for our daily walk. I have no doubt that there was still much gossip, and even some suspicion, about Alice and me ; but we were inoffensive, and were not without means, so we were annoyed by no direct investigations into our history. We had no one in the house with us. Alice did everything ; for though I made a pretence of helping her, I did her little service. Sometimes I put my own bedchamber in order, with a child's satisfaction, but no small degree of fatigue ; and with so small a house, and so little trouble neces-

sary, there was not much to do. I could not bear Alice to be out of my presence ; we eat together, sat together, walked together—I was quite dependent upon her—altogether a great change had come upon me. I never had been what people call intellectual—but now in the day of my weakness how I clung to the womanly occupations, the womanly society—ay, to such a poor thing as gossip, which was only redeemed from being the very vulgarest of amusements, because it was gossip of the past. When I sat at my sewing, with Alice talking to me ; when I listened to tales of this one and the other one, whom she had known in her youth,—everything about them ; their dress, their habits, their marriages, their children, their misfortunes ; when I cut, and sewed, and contrived these pretty things I still was making, sometimes I was almost happy. Yes, if it was in reality a descent from more elevated and elevating occupations, I still must confess to it ; a woman after all is but a woman—and there are times when the greatest book, or the grandest imagi-

nations in the world, have no attractions compared with those of a piece of muslin, a needle and a thread. I felt it so, at least. I remember the little parlour gratefully, with its round table and overflowing workbasket, the beautiful river and the passing boats without, and Alice recalling the experiences of her youth within.

For all this time my only safeguard lay in trying to forget, or to turn my back upon, the great question of my life. I no longer brooded over the injury my husband had done me; it seemed to have floated away from my sight, and become an imagination, a vision, a dream. I could not even recall our life at Cottiswoode; when I attempted to return to it a veil fell upon my eyes, and a dull remorse at my heart made the very attempt at recollection intolerable to me. Instead of that, the bright days before our marriage, the bright days after it, continually, and even against my will, came to my mind. I went over and over again the course of our happy journey; I recalled all our hopes,

all our conversations, all our plans for the future ; and this was all over, all gone, vanished like a tale that is told ! It is not wonderful that I should try with all my might to keep myself from thinking. It was dreadful to fall into such a reverie as this, and then to awaken from it, and recollect how everything really was.

I had heard from my agent in Cambridge, and had received money from him. We were plentifully supplied, yet needed very little. We lived as simply as any peasant women could have lived ; and though we had now a few flowers in the little fantastic flower-plots before the window, and had dismissed the shabby evergreens, and pruned the "traveller's joy," we had made no other alteration in the house. It was now May, nearly the middle of the month, and perfect summer, for, as I have said, everything was unusually early this year. No letters except the agent's had come to me. I thought my husband was content that I should be lost, and have my own will. When I was

quite alone, I sometimes thought that he was eased and relieved by my absence, and the thought cost me some bitter tears. I could not bear to be of no importance to him; and then I fretted myself with vain speculations. Why was he so angry when I spoke of Flora Ennerdale? If he had but married Flora Ennerdale, how happy she would have made him; and I—I would have pined and died in secret, and never done him wrong. So I thought in my fond, wretched, desolate musings. Fond!—yes, my heart had escaped from me, and flown back to him. I would not for the world have whispered it to any one—I refused to acknowledge it to myself—yet it was true.

I was alone in the house, and these thoughts had come strongly upon me. Alice was very reluctant to leave me alone, and only when she was compelled by some household necessity went out without me; but she had wanted something this afternoon before the time of our usual walk, and I was sitting by myself in the silent little house. Though I avoided solitude by every

means in my power, I yet prized the moment when it came to me—and I had been indulging myself in dreary longings, in silent prayers, and weeping, when Alice returned. She came in to me very hastily, with a good deal of agitation in her face, and when she saw my eyes, in which, I suppose, there were signs that I had been crying, she started, and cried “Have you seen him? have you seen him already?”

“Seen *him*—whom?” I cried with a great shiver of excitement; what a useless question it was! as well as if I had seen him, I knew *he* must be here.

She came and took my hand and bent over me, soothing and caressing. “Darling, don’t be startled,” said Alice; “oh, how foolish I am! I thought you had seen him when I saw the water in your eyes. Dear Miss Hester, keep a good heart, and don’t tremble—don’t tremble, there’s a dear! I’ve seen him indeed—he’s here, come to see you, looking wan and worn, and very anxious, poor young gentleman. Oh, take thought of what you will say to him, Miss

Hester ! every minute I expect to hear him at the door."

It was a great shock to me ; I felt that there was a deadly pallor on my face—I felt my heart beat with a stifled rapid pulsation. I could not think of anything. I could not fancy what I would say. I was about to see him, to hear his voice again. I felt a wild delight, a wild reluctance ; I could have risen and fled from him—yet it seemed to lift me into a sudden Elysium, this hope of seeing him again. Strange, inconsistent, perverse—I could not be sure for a moment what impulse I would follow. I sat breathless, holding my hand upon my heart, listening with all my powers. I seemed for the instant to be capable of nothing but of listening for his footstep ; my physical strength and my mental were alike engrossed. I could neither move nor think.

I do not know how long it was ; I know there was a terrible interval during which Alice talked to me words which I paid no attention to, and did not know—and then it came, that well-known

footstep. I heard the little gate swing behind him—I heard the gravel crushed beneath his quick step, and then Alice opened the door, and a sudden lull of intense emotion came over me. He was before me, standing there, yes, there!—but a dizzy, blinding haze came over my eyes—after the first glimpse I did not see him, till I had recovered again.

And he was not more composed than I was; not so much so in appearance, I believe. He came up and held out his hand, and when I did not move, he took mine and held it tightly—tightly between his, and gazed full into my face, with his own all quivering and eloquent with emotion. At this moment the impulse for which I had been waiting came to me, and steadied my tremulous expectation once more into resolve; once more the bitterness which had perished in his absence returned with double force—his own words began to ring in my ears, and my cheek tingled with the fiery flush of returning resentment. *I had deceived him; he had married a sweet and tender woman, and*

when his eyes were opened, he had found by his side only *me*. I thought no longer of my bridegroom; my yearnings for affection were turned into a passionate desire for freedom; it was not Harry, but Edgar Southcote on whom I looked with steady eyes.

He, I am sure, did not and could not notice any change of expression; he saw my colour vary, that was all—but his own feelings were sufficiently tumultuous to occupy him.

“Hester,” he said, “Hester, Hester!” He did not seem able to say any more—he only stood before me holding my hand very close, looking into my face with eyes in which everything else was veiled by his joy in seeing me again. I saw it was so—heaven help me—what a miserable torturer I was! my heart gave a bound of wild delight to feel my power over him still.

When I made no response, he forced me at last; already he was chilled, but he did not change his position—he held out both his hands, his arms rather, tears came to his eyes, and with a longing, wistful, entreating gaze he fixed them

upon me. "Hester, come!" he said, "come—I have the only right to support you. In absence and solitude we have found out how it is that we are bound to each other, not by promise and vow alone, but by heart and soul. In strife or in peace we have but one existence. Hester, come back to me—come! let us not be sending our hearts over the world after each other—we cannot be separated—come back to me!"

How true it was, how true it was! but the heart that had been yearning for him, half an hour ago, was beating against my bosom now with miserable excitement, resisting him bitterly and to the death.

"Why should I come back," I said; "has anything changed? are our circumstances different from what they were?"

"Yes," he cried eagerly; "we have been apart—we have found out our true union—we have learned what it is to pine for a look, the very slightest, of the face most dear in the world to us. We have found how transitory, how poor all offences and resentments are, and how the

original outlives and outlasts them. Hester, do I not speak the truth?"

I dared not contradict my own heart and say no—I dared not do it—everything he said was true.

“ I do not mean you to suppose that it is self-denial on my part and a desire to test this, which has made me so slow of following you,” he continued, growing heated and breathless as he found that I did not answer ; “ I have but newly found out your retreat, Hester—found it out after long and diligent searching, which has given me many a sick heart for a month past. I need not describe the distress into which your flight plunged me ; when you passed me on the road I was struck with a pang of fear, but I refused to entertain it. Think how I felt when I went home, and saw the pitying looks of the servants, and found your pitiless note upon my table ! They told me you placed it there yourself, Hester ; and when I enter that room, I sit idly thinking of you, trying to fancy where you stood, wondering, wondering if there was no ruth nor mercy in your heart.”

The recollection of that moment rushed back on me as he spoke ; he saw the convulsive trembling which came upon me, he heard the sob which I could not restrain ; thus far I betrayed myself. I could not remember *that* unmoved ; but when he bent over me with eager anxiety, I drew my hand away, and said I was quite well—quite well, I needed no support.

“Hester,” he said in a tone of such tenderness that it almost overpowered me, “I know I am trying your strength severely ; I may be inexcusable—I may be hazarding your health with my vehemence ; tell me if it is so—I will not speak another word, I will rather give up all my own hopes. God forbid that you should suffer for my violence ; speak to me—say one word, Hester—tell me what I am to do.”

“I can bear to hear all you have to say to me,” I said with a burning blush upon my cheek. The exertion I made to maintain my own calmness was exhausting me dreadfully, but I could bear it better when he spoke, and when my natural spirit of resistance was roused by

his words, than when he went away or was silent, when I would be left to the consuming remorseful persecution of my own thoughts.

When I said this he looked at me steadily and sadly;—"Was it hopeless, then—would I receive him in no fashion but this?" I met his gaze with the blank look of sullen resentment; he turned away from me with a sigh, and wrung his hands with impatience; then he came back, took the chair in which Alice had been sitting, and sat down opposite to me.

"Then it is to be so," he said with suppressed bitterness; "neither time nor solitude, neither tenderness nor absence, says a gentle word for me in your heart; you are resolved that we shall be miserable, Hester; you will leave me to the pity of the servants, *you* will show none; you will condemn me to frightful anxiety, anxiety which I dare not venture to anticipate—you will shut me out from every right—I must not be near, I must not try to support you; is this what you quietly doom me to, Hester?"

"You use strange words; I doom you to

nothing," said I ; " we were very wretched when we were together—you told me you were deceived in me, and I also was deceived in you ; all that I have done is to come away, to free each of us from a galling and perpetual slavery. If I give no pity, I ask none—let justice be done between us—and it is justice surely to permit me to take care for myself when I do not encumber you. You have not more to suffer or to complain of, than I have ; we are on equal terms—and so long as we are apart we cannot drive each other mad, as you said I would do to you ; I beseech you to be content—let us remain as we are ; it will be best for us both."

If I was agitated when I began to speak, I had become quite calm before I ended. He never withdrew his eye from me—he followed my motions, almost my breath—and when I moved my hands and clasped them together, as I did to support myself, his gaze turned to them—my hands were thin and worn, and very white—they looked like an invalid's. Before I was aware, he bent over

and kissed them, saying, "Poor Hester! poor Hester!" Ah, it was very hard for me to keep up to my resolution, reading his thoughts as I did with an instinctive certainty. He was not thinking of my unkind and bitter words—he was thinking only of *me*.

But when he spoke after this pause I saw clearly enough that my words had not escaped him; he did not entreat any longer; he saw it was vain; but the kindness of his tone was undiminished. I fancied I could perceive the resolution he had taken now; that he had made up his mind not to strive with me, but to leave me to myself. I would rather he had persecuted me with the most violent and perpetual persecution; that I could have met with courage; but I knew what a longing, yearning, remorseful misery would come upon me when I was left to the sole company of my own heart.

"I will wait till you come to think of something else than justice," he said kindly, but sadly. "To have my rights yielded to

me only because they are rights, will never satisfy me, Hester—I warn you of this now; but you are not doing justice; I know that you can have no doubt what are my feelings to you; you know what my love is, but not how much it can bear, and you treat me with cruel injustice, Hester. Enough of this—I will plead my own cause no more—I leave everything to yourself. By-and-bye I do not doubt you will see my *rights* in a different aspect; but I will not be content with my rights,” he continued, growing unconsciously vehement; “when you are willing to do me justice, I will still be dissatisfied. It is not justice I want from you—and the time of our reunion will never come till you reject it as I do. I know that I am right.”


“It will never come,” said I, under my breath.

“The most wretched criminal has hope, Hester,” he said, rising with impatience which he could not control, and coming to the window, “and I am not so much wiser than

my kind as to be able to live without it. I have need of humility and patience, I grant you, and these are difficult qualities—but I will quarrel no more on my own account, and it is hard to maintain a feud on one side only. Will you permit me to live near you, since you insist on leaving me? will you let me see you now and then? will you let me be near at hand, if by any chance you should relent, and wish for me? In your present circumstances, this is no great boon to yield to your husband, Hester.”

“What end would it answer?” I said, though my heart leaped with a strange mixture of joy and pain at his words; “I am sure we are better quite apart.”

“Be it so,” he said, and then he came forward to me very gravely; “I wait your time, Hester,” he said, taking my hand once more, with a face of serious and compassionate kindness, “we have, both of us, much grief to go through yet, but I will wait and be patient; I consent to what you say; I will



not intrude into your presence again till you bid me come—you smile—you will never bid me come? that is in God's hands, Hester, and so are you, my bride, my solitary suffering wife! I leave you to Him who will support you better than I could. Farewell. It is a bitter word to say, but I obey you. Hester—Hester—not a word for me! farewell.”

He stooped over me, kissed my forehead, wrung my hand, and then he was gone.


He was gone;—I gazed with aching eyes into the place where he had been; here this moment; gone perhaps for ever. I cried aloud in wild anguish; I thought my heart would burst; it required no long process, no time nor thought to change my mad rebellious heart again; I could struggle with him, resist him, use him cruelly while he was but here before me; but when he was gone—oh, when he was gone!

When Alice came in I was sobbing aloud and convulsively; I had no power of self-restraint; all my pride and strength were

broken down. "He is gone," I repeated to myself; "he is gone!" I could think of nothing else. Alice spoke to me, but I did not hear; she tried to lift me from the sofa, where I lay burying my face in my hands, but I would not let her touch me; no one had ever seen such violence—such a wild outbreak of passion and misery in me before.

It was all my own doing—there was the sting of it! I could ask sympathy from no one, confess my distress to no one. My own heart stung me, upbraided me, made malicious thrusts and wounds at my weakness. I had done it all myself—what did I think of my miserable handiwork? I had made my own life, and this was the result of it. I had cast him away—cast him away. I could not tell why. I could remember nothing cruel that *he* had ever done to me, and he would come back no more.

"Miss Hester, you will kill yourself," cried Alice indignantly. I heard these words as if they were the first she had said, and



with an immediate and powerful effort I controlled myself. No, I would not endanger the future, I would not lose everything. I raised myself up and returned to my work; I tried to forget what had happened,—that he had actually stood there before me, that this little room had held him, that his voice was still ringing in the dim subdued atmosphere. Every time I thought of it I trembled with agitation. The day was the same, yet it was different; the hours went on as usual, yet how totally changed they were. It was over,—the event I had been unconsciously, involuntarily, looking forward to. This dimmed, dulled life was to go on now with no new expectation in it—it was all over; he had promised to let me alone.

And there was Alice, looking at me with eager, solicitous, inquiring eyes, anxious to know what had been said, what had happened, wondering at my strange mood, trying to find out, with her own thoughts and looks, how I felt. Alice could not comprehend me. When


her first belief, that I did not care for him, was shaken, she could find no reason for my conduct, no cause for all I had done; she did not understand my perversity; in the motives of her own simple Christian heart she found no clue to the problem of mine. She put no questions to me, but sat, where *he* had been sitting, sad, disapproving, full of wonder, her hope disappointed and her love grieved, aware I was wrong, yet reluctant to think so. Poor Alice! I was a great charge to her, and a perplexing one; she did not know how to deal with me.

When I was able to command my voice, I spoke to her. "Alice, Mr Southcote has been here," I said, "but he has promised not to come back again. He will never intrude into my presence again, he says, till I call him, and I am not very likely to do that: When anything happens, Alice—I intended to have said so before—you will write to him without delay; remember, I told you so; he has a right to that."

The words struck me strangely as I repeated them. Had I already begun, according to his own prophesy, to calculate what his *rights* were? but he had warned me that he would find no satisfaction in that.

“And is this all, Miss Hester?” said Alice, looking at me wistfully; “oh, darling, well you know I’ve never said a word. I’ve never dared to take part with him that should have needed no help from a poor woman like me—but I can’t keep silent, Miss Hester—I can’t now; what’s in my heart I must say, for you’re my own child. Miss Hester, dear, I can’t help if you’re angry—but what do you think a true friend can pray for you? one that loves you dear above all the world, what do you think she would be obliged to pray, the first thing of all that was in her heart?”

I was much startled by the question, for it was at once perfectly unexpected, and very solemnly and seriously put. I did not answer, but looked at her with earnestness as great as her own.



“First of all, before even the safety and the blessing and the joy—oh, Miss Hester!” cried Alice, with strange emotion, “that you may be made to see which is good and which is evil, and to choose the right way. I dare not ask the blessing first, darling—I dare not! I’d lay down my life for an hour’s comfort to you, Miss Hester; you know it’s not boasting, you know it’s true—but you’re following a wrong way, and sorrow is the right thing to come to that, rather than joy. I cannot help it—you may put me away from you, as you’ve put a better love than mine—but I must say what’s in my heart.”

I could neither be angry, nor indignant; I could not meet Alice’s unexpected severity as she thought I would. I was no heroine, I was only a woman, a poor, young, foolish, solitary woman. I cried, it was all I could do; I was almost glad she reproved me, glad that she thought God must punish and forsake me for my sin; I could not excuse or justify myself, I had no heart to say anything—all my powers


were exhausted ; I could only lie upon my sofa, silent, not venturing to look at Alice, and doing what I could to restrain my tears. But they would not be restrained ; gentler and yet more abundant they fell from under the cover of my clasped hands, and, little as I intended it, this was indeed the only way in which I could have vanquished Alice. She kept her own place for a few moments, trembling and irresolute, and then she came humbly towards me and drew my head to her bosom ; “ Oh, darling, forgive me, forgive me ! ” cried Alice, and her tears fell as fast as mine.

When I found that I could not put an end to my own weeping-fit, Alice grew very much alarmed. She brought an armful of pillows and arranged them on the sofa, and made me lie down to sleep—I obeyed her like a child—I took some wine when she brought it, and closed my eyes at her bidding. She sat by my side watching me, and when my eyelids unclosed a little, I saw her soft white apron close by my cheek, and almost thought I was sleeping with

my head on her knee as I used to do when I was a little girl. At last I did fall asleep, but I never was conscious that I had done so. I did not change the scene in my dreams: I was still here, still in this room, and he was beside me again—but we did not speak of parting now—all that was over—*that* was the dream, and it was past. I do not recollect that there were any words to make our reunion sure, but there did not need any, for I was completely persuaded of it in that strange real dream. When I woke, Alice was still sitting by me, and there was the strangest ease and satisfaction in my heart. I looked past her eagerly, and round the room, and asked, “Where is he? where is he?” She did not speak, and then I knew that it was all a dream.

But I would not break down again. I sat erect and took up my work, and told her I was quite well now, though my head was aching violently, and my heart sank with a dreary heaviness. A cup of tea would do me good, Alice said, and she left me to prepare it.

When I was alone I went to the window and opened it to let in the fresh sweet air upon my hot brow. Yes, it was the happiness and the reconciliation that were a dream; the wretched solitude, the remorse, the hopelessness were real things; and what was the future? I could not help a shudder of expectation and terror. My truest, dearest, most indulgent friend—Alice herself was almost afraid to ask a blessing for me. Hitherto I had always asked it myself, but her words arrested me; I only wondered what kind of judgment God would send to mark my sin—would it be only death? and while once more a few tears fell from my eyes I began to think of the letter I should write to my husband to be given him when I was gone away for ever; of perhaps the precious legacy I should leave him; the gift that would pay him tenfold for all his grief and trouble with me. These thoughts soothed me. When Alice returned, I withdrew from the window, and came to the table and took the tea she poured out for me. I was subdued and



exhausted. I was not now so miserable as I had been. I pleased myself with the idea of making this last atonement, of putting an end to the misery of our wedded life, and to the problem which I did not know how to solve otherwise, by the early death which every one would shed a natural tear for. Once more I wiped a few tears from my own cheek, and then I went upstairs very quietly in my exhaustion to prepare for our walk.

When we went out, I was less composed. I remembered then that he had trod this same path only a few hours ago, that, perhaps, he still was here. I hurried Alice on—I looked back and around with a stealthy eagerness—my heart began to beat and my breath to fail as this occurred to me. He might be here—he might even see me now with my lingering feeble footsteps, and read in my face traces of the wild and strong emotion which had visited me since he came. I drew my veil over my face, I hastened to the very margin of the water, where no one could see me closely.



Wherever I turned I was possessed with the idea that from some eminence—some visionary height—he was watching me, and interpreting my very movements. I did not desire to escape—though I hurried about restlessly, I did not wish to return again ; and it was only when the darkness fell that Alice persuaded me to go home. Alice did not know what was passing in my vexed and troubled mind. I think now my physical weakness must have had a great deal to do with it—what a dreadful chaos it was !

THE THIRD DAY.

A LITTLE low cry—what was it?—I never heard it before, yet it went to my heart, almost with a pang of delight. Alice, bring it—bring it! I cannot wait for all those snowy robes, and all the joyful, tearful importance of my dear, dear, kind nurse, my almost mother. Here in its little flannel wrapper—a little moving bundle, thrusting about its little limbs, turning round its little downy head with the first instinct of life to that kind bosom, crying its little wailing cry—oh kindest heaven!—oh God most wonderful!—is it mine, mine, my own child?

I felt neither pain nor weakness. I consented to lie still, because they said I must, and because I was happy beyond expression,

and neither rebellion nor disobedience was in me. I lay quite still, pulling back the curtains to look at Alice as she put on those dainty little garments, one by one—to look at the moving thing upon her knee, the little hand thrust up into the air, the vigorous kicks and thrusts with which it struggled. *It!* a spark of sudden anger woke in me when some one said *it*—that was correct enough half an hour ago—but this was *he*, an individual being, my baby, my own, mine! I cannot tell to any one the rapture in which I lay watching Alice as she put upon him his first little robes. I was in a woman's paradise—a moment which can come but once in a lifetime. What mother does not remember, after all her dread, her awe, her suffering, the heavenly rest in which she lay looking at her firstborn? I think there is no such ecstasy either before or after; it is all over—all over!—the ordeal which frame and spirit have been trembling at, are past like a dream, and who remembers them? — and in that

strange delicious luxury of ease and weakness, there seems no longer anything to desire. I do not know,—perhaps it is not an elevated idea at all,—but my best realisation of the unspeakable happiness was in that hour after my little boy was born.

When that most important toilet was finished, Alice brought him to me in the long white robe, rich with my own needlework, and the pretty close cap covering his little downy head. She laid him down on my arm, and drew a step apart, and looked at us both, crying for joy. “Bless you, my darling!” cried Alice; and then she fairly ran away with her bright tearful face, and I knew very well it was to relieve her full heart, and spend her tears.

And I lay here with my baby on my arm alone. He did not mind who watched him, as he knitted his baby brows, and twisted his baby mouth, and clenched his harmless fists, till I laughed and cried together in indescribable delight. Then a change came

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over me. I wanted some one to share my happiness—to show my treasure to. Some one—oh what cold words these were! I wanted one—only one—to make my joy perfect. My heart expanded over my baby, with such a sense of want, of incompleteness. I cried aloud, “Oh Harry, Harry, Harry!” Where was the father to see and bless the child? This blessing which every other mother had, I had cast away from me.

I could not put his infant into his arms—I could not watch the joy on his face to brighten the light upon my own. I wept now after another fashion. I turned my head aside that my tears might not fall upon my baby. Oh Harry, Harry! I was content you should be away from me in the evil time, but it broke my heart to be alone in my great joy!

Alice could not see how I had been moved when she returned. I took care to conceal my tearful eyes from her—and indeed it was not hard to return to gladness, looking upon

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the face of my child. She brought me a cup of tea, and pretended she had only gone away to fetch it. "I did, indeed, Miss Hester," she said, with a tearful smile that belied her; "though, to tell the truth, I *had* a good cry when I got downstairs. Dear, do but look at him, with his sweet little fist doubled. Will you beat your mamma already, baby boy? and a son too! Darling, I'm sure you don't know what to say for joy."

"Oh, Alice, it is all beyond saying," said I. "I don't know why this should have come to me, when even you yourself—you who are always kindest—did not dare to ask a blessing for me; and after you said that, Alice, I never dared to ask one for myself."

"But I did not mean that, Miss Hester," said Alice, humbly; "I *did* crave for the blessing night and day—and here it is, bless his dear little heart! the sight of him brings back my pleasant days to me, dear. A woman never has such a joy as a baby. Do you shake

your head at that, Miss Hester? My darling, you'll come to know."

"I do know, Alice," I said under my breath; "I never was so happy before, nor so thankful nor—so sad. If I do not die he will have nobody but me, and what can I do for him? Alice, did you think of what I told you?—do you remember, you were to write when all was over? I thought then I was sure to die."

"Every one does, dear," said Alice, cheerfully; "but there's nothing about dying now, darling. We can't have that; and, Miss Hester, have you ever thought what was to be baby's name?"

Once more I was taken by surprise. Once more I turned my face away from him, that his sweet cheek might not be fretted by tears. I could say only one word—"Harry"—but that was enough for Alice. Her face brightened again, and she stooped over baby to give me time to recover myself. Alice was a wise nurse, and would not even notice

my agitation; so I made an effort to subdue it, and was calm once more.

“Alice, you will be sure to write,” I whispered; “and—well, *you* have seen other babies—do you really think he is very pretty, or is it only because he is our own?”

Alice satisfied me by a great many assurances. “Babies are not always pretty, darling,” said the impartial Alice; “I have seen the oddest little things—though their mothers were always pleased; but Master Harry is a noble boy! look how big he is—why he’s quite a weight to lift already;—and such a head of hair,” she continued, gently pushing back his cap to show the silky down beneath; “and look here, Miss Hester, what arms! he might be a month old, bless him, instead of half a day—do I really think it? My darling, I never, all my days, was called a flatterer before.”

Nor had I the least inclination to call Alice a flatterer now, for, without any partiality, he really was a very beautiful boy, though he lay there winking, frowning, and

making such pugilistic use of his little hands. I thought they were miracles, these little hands, when it pleased him to unfold them; such beautiful little miniatures, with their delicious soft touch, and tapered tender little fingers. I bent down my cheek to put it into the way of those natural weapons of his as he fenced about with them. I could have cried again with delight at those small blows. Then Alice pretended he was too much for me, and that she could not permit me to get excited; I knew very well this was only an excuse to get him into her own arms—but I was as glad of Alice's joy as of my own. I had given her much to grieve her kind faithful heart, it was time I gave her something to make her glad; and what could do that so well as my baby boy? I watched her walking softly up and down the room, holding him so daintily, so prettily upon both her hands—and then she removed him to one arm, and made a reclining couch of it, where he seemed to lie so easy, so securely with his

head upon her bosom. I looked, and wondered, and envied. Only study and experience could give such facility—and I had a strong impression that I should be afraid to handle that little precious frame as Alice did. Somehow or other it seemed to complete Alice, and make her a perfect picture. The baby, with its long streaming white robes, nestled so sweetly into her breast, looked a necessary adjunct to her now—I wondered how I should never have perceived the want of it before. I called her to me, and told her what I thought. Alice smiled with real gratification. “I was thinking so myself, dear,” she said; “I am ten years younger since this morning. But it goes to my heart, Miss Hester, for it reminds me of old times.”

She put up her hand to her eyes softly, though she still smiled; but those sweet tears of Alice's would never have chafed a baby's cheek. Sweet resignation, pure love, the breath of a subdued and chastened heart was in them. She was thinking of those whom

God had taken away, whom God would one day restore her to—they were different tears from mine.

When he fell asleep, Alice brought him back to me, and laid him down upon my arm once more. I watched for a while his sweet breath, his closed eyes, his baby face in its first repose—and then a drowsiness crept over me, and I, too, fell asleep; it was such a sleep as I had slept once before, the day when my husband came. I knew I was lying here with my baby in my arms. I realised all the immediate joy that was in my heart—but I dreamed that I was presenting his child to Harry—that I was telling him how I had named the baby already—that I was pouring out all my thoughts and all my desires into the only ear in the world that could hear everything that was in my heart; and there was not a care nor a cloud upon me—again *they* seemed only dreams, and this happiness was the truth.

When I awoke it was with a slight start, and

I was strangely bewildered to see that Alice had lifted baby from my arms, had wrapped him in a great shawl, and was carrying him away. "Where are you going, Alice?" I cried in alarm. She was confused when she saw me awake, and hesitated for a moment. "My darling, I am only going to let little Master see the house he has come home to," she said, with an attempt to be playful, which only called my attention to the tremble in her voice; "we'll come back again this moment, dear," and she carried him away down stairs. A suspicion of what it was, came to me, and I listened eagerly. I heard her slow careful step descending; then I heard a suppressed exclamation. Neither my prudence nor my regard for my own health could restrain me; I was not able to subdue the wild beating of my heart, my breathless agitation. Did they think they could deceive me?—did they think his voice or his step could be in the house and I not know it? I raised myself up a little, and listened with my whole heart and might. Yes, he had come to see his

child—and it was Alice who showed my beautiful boy to him—it was not *I*. I could hear his whisper—I thought myself that I could have heard and known it at any distance—I could imagine the scene; I could imagine his silent delight, his thanksgiving, his words of joy. I could almost fancy myself a clandestine spectator, a stealthy looker-on, beholding from behind a curtain the joy in which I had no share. Oh it was bitter! dreadful!—he rejoicing over our baby below—I lying alone in my misery and weakness here. I did not think of him, watching without the door, shut out from the house, while *I* was tasting first this exquisite and sacred joy. I thought but of myself, deserted, desolate, no one approving of me, no one commending me, my own very heart rising up in judgment, my every thought an accuser, alone and solitary, my husband only caring to know that I was safe, and desiring nothing more. I think I had such anguish in that moment as only comes to many, diluted through a whole life. How breathlessly I watched and listened—how con-

scious I seemed to be of every movement and every word—how I started at the faint sound of Baby's voice, and had almost sprung from my bed to snatch *him* at least to my arms! I who was the only one who could still him, his mother, his nurse, the being upon whom his little life depended by nature. Why, even for a moment, did they take him away from me?

When Alice returned I did not say a word of my suspicions or discoveries. My heart sank when I heard the door close upon my husband—when I heard the step whose faintest echo I knew so well, passing through the gravel path of our little garden. Till then I still retained an involuntary hope that at least he would request to see me—but he did not; he was gone, and his steps rang upon my heart with a dull echo as he passed out of hearing. I felt like one suddenly struck dumb—I could not speak—I could not shake off the weight and oppression upon my brain, and the bitter pang in my spirit. Already I felt a fever growing on me, but I did not complain of it. My lips were sealed; I

could not say I was ill — I could not speak a word. The little one was laid in my bosom once more, and I held him with passionate tenderness; but even while I did so, I felt the sickness at my heart, and the cold dew on my forehead, and the fainting, failing sensation over all my frame. Still I said nothing; I seemed to be bound up within myself with a strange, terrible wakefulness and consciousness, like one in a nightmare. I felt as one might feel who saw a murderer slowly advancing towards him while there was help at hand, yet who was paralysed, and could neither move nor cry for deliverance. I held my baby close, till he cried and struggled—then I suffered Alice to take him away. I heard her questioning and calling me; she came and wiped my forehead, and stooped down, and begged me to speak to her.

“Are you ill, darling? are you ill?” cried Alice. At last I said faintly, “I suppose so;” and she rang the bell in great haste to summon a woman who waited below, and send her for the doctor. I was growing almost unconscious;

the only clear thing I recollect in the chaos of indefinite pain and trouble which overwhelmed me, was baby's little plaintive cry, and my anxiety to get him back into my arms. Faintly and dimly I could perceive Alice feeding him ; and I did not feel quite sure whether my husband was, or was not, in the room in my strange, half-delirious state. I was not sure of anything ; I heard strange noises in my ears—sometimes I thought I was lying in a dangerous place, and something from which I could not escape was hurrying upon me to crush me to atoms ; and then again I was at Cottiswoode—yet always here, always conscious of Baby and of Alice. Hitherto the many and great agitations to which I had been subject, or had brought upon myself, had done me no harm. As safely as though I had been living the most placid life had this great trial been surmounted ; but it was different now. The cause was different ; always before my husband had been but too anxious to change my mind towards him himself. It was a new and dreadful experience,

this leaving me alone; and I was exhausted and weak, though I had not expected it; the long arrears of past suffering came back upon me now.

I suppose I must have been very ill for a few hours. I cannot tell; I remember only a vague and feverish wretchedness, an aching, longing desire to complain to some one, and a burning consciousness that I had no one on earth to complain to. I saw visions, too, in my illness; unhappy momentary dreams—glimpses of my husband rejoicing with strangers—placing my baby in the arms of another—always deserting and forsaking me. My heart was shocked and wounded; it was not an ordinary stroke, but a blow unexpected, which struck beyond all my poor defences, and laid me prostrate. Yet I could not have been long thus, for when I came to myself it was still the twilight of the same day. The room was darkened, and the candle burned faintly on the table at the extreme end of the little apartment—and there was a faint perfume in the room of

some essence they had been using for me. It was June, a soft mild summer night, yet a little fire was burning in the grate, for baby's sake and by it sat the woman who had come to assist Alice, holding my child in her lap. The first sign I perceived in myself of recovery, was the indignant start with which I observed that this woman, I suppose overcome by the heat and by doing nothing, was nodding and dozing at her post. I was not aware at the moment of having had anything the matter with me. I looked up with a startled, indignant glance at Alice, who was bending over me anxiously. "Bring him to me, Alice," I cried; "or, if I must not have my baby, do *you* keep him at least. She is a stranger; she does not care for him. Look, look, she has fallen asleep!" The woman started and opened her eyes with a guilty look as I spoke, and Alice said, "Yes, darling, yes!" as she bent over me and continued bathing my forehead. I put away her hand impatiently. "Take him yourself, Alice, or bring him to me," I cried again. I had a

shuddering which I could not restrain at seeing him in this stranger's arms.

"Do what she tells you," said the doctor, who was standing by the side of Alice, in a low tone of authority; "she is better—bring the child to her; she will be well now, if she can sleep."

Then Alice brought my baby and laid him in my arms; my dear, sweet, innocent, sleeping child! what horrible desert had I been wandering in, since he was taken from my arms? He was sleeping so quietly, so softly! nothing knew he of the subdued, yet still existing pain, in the bosom his little head was pillowed on. "Sleeping like a child!" I knew now what the common saying meant. My cap and nightdress were wet with the perfumed cool waters Alice had been bathing my brow with, and I had a confused pain and ringing in my head, and the most complete exhaustion over me; but I was better, and felt almost easy in my weakness in mind as well as in body. When the doctor had given me a draught—I suppose to

make me sleep—he went away ; and I was so much disturbed by the stranger in the room, that Alice sent her downstairs, and herself began to prepare for the night. I remember now, like a picture, the aspect of that little dim room ; the single candle burning faintly far away from me ; the summer night, scarcely dark ; the pale, blue sky, looking in at the edge of the narrow blind ; the bright sparkle of the little fire midway in the room, burning with a subdued, quiet glee, as if in triumph over the summer warmth which needed this auxiliary. Beside me was a large, old-fashioned, elbow chair, in which Alice was to watch, or sleep, as she said, and a round table with some *eau de cologne* and phials of medicine, a small flower vase, containing some roses, and a book. It was deep twilight here in this corner, but my eyes were accustomed to it, and I could see everything ; most clearly of all, I could see my baby's sweet, slumbering face, and feel his breath like balm, rising and falling upon my cheek.

And then my eye, I cannot tell how, was caught by the book upon the table ; when Alice came to her chair beside me, I told her to read something. Alice was very tremulous and afraid, and feared I could not bear it—but I knew better ; so she brought the candle nearer and began to read some chapters from the Gospel of John. I cannot tell how it was after that terrible fit of illness and anguish that I should have felt my mind so clear and so much at leisure—it was like the fresh dewy interval after a thunderstorm when the air is lightened and the earth refreshed. As Alice read, I lay perfectly calm, holding my child in my arms, grave, composed, thoughtful, as if I had reached a new stage in my life. There seemed a certain novelty and freshness in those divine words ; I was not listening to them mechanically—my imagination went back to the speaker, and realised what individual voice this was, addressing me as it addressed all the world. What wonderful words these were, what strange meanings ! Justice—justice—God's meaning of the word, not man's ; that He

should bear it Himself,—the grand original, universal penalty—He, the offended one; no, not a weak poor, benevolent forgiveness—not that, but justice, justice—divinest word! Justice, which blinds the very eyes of this poor humanity with that glorious interpretation which only the Lord could give. That he should bear the punishment, and not the criminal—strange, strange, most strange!—the word read differently when men translated it, but this was how God declared the unchangeable might and power it had. To a wavering, disquieted human heart, struggling with its poor wrongs and injuries, rejecting pity, demanding justice, how wonderful was all this! Alice stopped in her reading after a while, but my thoughts did not pause. I lay quite still, looking with my open eyes into the dim atmosphere with its faint rays of light, and fainter perfume. How my coward fancies slunk and stole away out of sight, out of hearing, of Him who spoke. My justice and His justice, how different they are;

did the same name belong to them? I was not excited, I was not afraid; I thought of it all with a strange composure, an extraordinary calm conviction. I had no desire to sleep, yet I was quite at rest—I did not even feel guilty—only dolefully mistaken, wrong, as unlike Him as anything could be; and able to do nothing but wonder at His sublime and wonderful justice, and at the arrogant, presumptuous offence, which had taken the place of justice with me.

And then at last, I fancy I must have fallen asleep, for I had strange sights of bars and judgment seats, of criminals receiving sentence, and a terrible impression on my mind that I was the next who should be condemned, but that always a bright figure stepped in before me, and the Judge perceived me not. When I woke again it was deep in the night,—Alice was lulling baby, the moon was shining into the room, and I was lying as quiet and as easy as if no such thing as pain had been in the world.

“You are better, dear?” said Alice in a



whisper of hesitating joy as she came to me with some cool pleasant drink she had made. My heart was so light, I was almost playful. "I think I am quite well," I said. "I ought to get up, and let you lie down, Alice; have you had a great deal of trouble with me to-day?"

"Hush, darling, no trouble," said Alice, hurriedly, "but you've had a bad turn; go to sleep, dear, go to sleep."

I said, "Yes, Alice," as a child might have said it—and clasped my hands and said the same prayers I had said on the morning of my wedding day. I fell asleep in the middle of them, and ended this day in the deepest peacefulness,—I knew not why.

THE FOURTH DAY.

I WAS now quite well, and it was July, the very flush and prime of summer. After that first day I had progressed steadily and was well, before I had any right to be well, according to the established order of things—for though I was not robust, my health was of the strongest, and I had a vigorous elastic frame, which never long succumbed. I would not listen to Alice's proposal to have a maid for baby ; as soon as I was able I took entire possession of him myself, and did everything for my boy. I had no other cares or occupations—he was my sole business, and he filled all my time with his requirements. What a happiness it was ! If I had been at Cottiswoode, and had a proper, well-appointed nursery, how much of the purest delight, how

many of the sweetest influences I must have lost ! He was very rarely out of my arms, except when he slept, through the day, in the luxurious, beautiful cradle, such an odd contrast to the other equipments of the house, which we had got for him. I often smile at my own wilful, voluntary poverty now. We had by no means changed the simplicity of our living, and I was my baby's sole attendant, and was perfectly contented with this little mean, limited house ; but I sent Alice to London with the widest licence to buy the prettiest baby's cloak, the richest robes, the most delicate equipments for little Harry ; and Alice, nothing loath, came back again with a wardrobe fit for a young prince. Sitting by the morsel of fire in the small bed-room upstairs, with its white dimity hangings, and its clean scanty furniture, I dressed my baby in embroidered robes more costly than a month's house-keeping, and wrapping his rich cloak about him, and tying on, over his rich laced cap, the soft luxurious hat of quilted white satin which Alice had chosen to declare to every chance spectator

the proud pre-eminence of his sex—a boy ! I put on my own simple straw bonnet and went out with him, straying along the quiet roads, up and down the bank of the river, perfectly indifferent of what all the world might think, and smiling when I passed some genteel young mother of the village with her little maid trudging behind, carrying *her* baby. I trust my precious Harry in indifferent hands !—No—I only laughed at Alice's oratory as to what became my station. I had no station here, and wanted none. The curate's wife might lose caste if *she* wandered about, a volunteer nursemaid, with her child—but I was entirely free to follow my own will, and follow it I did, as, alas, I had always done, all my days.

I do not wonder that the people were bewildered what to think of me, and that gossip almost came to an end out of sheer amazement. I was always dressed with the most extreme simplicity and plainness, but I always wore upon my finger that splendid hereditary diamond which was the curse of our house. It was to be supposed that I could not afford a nurse, yet

there never had been seen such a magnificent baby wardrobe—very strange! nobody could make it out; and even the rector's wife, who paid me the extraordinary honour of a visit, after baby's baptism—though why she came I could not conceive, for she was a great lady, and chary of her patronage—looked round with an odd, amused, bewildered smile at the luxurious cradle, standing beside the hard hair-cloth sofa, and seemed slightly disposed to speak to me as she might have spoken to a capricious child. But I was wonderfully little moved by anything said to me, or of me; I went upon my own way undisturbed. All those bright summer forenoons I walked about with my baby, watching my sweet flower grow and flourish in the sunshine, myself enjoying the glory and the beauty of those summer days, as I never had enjoyed them before; sometimes I sat down upon a sunny bank near the river, when little Harry was asleep, and watched the ecstasy and rapture of the ships, as they flowed down entranced towards the struggles and tempests of the sea. I never

wearied of my sweet burden, though I was so proud to say he grew heavier every day, and made boastful complaints of his weight, as mothers use. Often my thoughts were grave enough ; sometimes I wept over my beautiful boy—but I could not resist the influences round me—the supreme delight of looking at his slumbering face—the sweet air that refreshed my own—the beautiful scene that still had power to charm me out of my heavy thoughts. Many doubts and many questions had agitated my mind since the day of my baby's birth, that day so full of joy, yet of humiliation and anguish. I had never recovered entirely from the depression which my husband's stolen visit to see his child had occasioned me. At the very time my heart was softening to him—yearning for him, at that very time it seemed his heart was closed against me. I had never since mentioned him to Alice—I did not pretend to ask her if she had written, nor to take any notice of his visit ; and amid all the happiness I had with my child, in my own heart there was the most dreary doubtfulness as to what I

should do. My heart was not sufficiently humbled to forget entirely its former mood. I could not subdue myself to call him back, even if I had not retained so clearly in my remembrance that last visit of his, which was not to me. It seemed a strange dreary retribution for all my offences against him, that now he himself was content to let me alone—that he had granted at last, when I no longer desired it, my often-repeated request, and left me unmolested—was it at peace? Alas, at peace was a very different matter! sometimes the words, “’Tis better in pure hate to let her have her will,” came over me with almost a ludicrous sense of my downfall and humiliation, but the smile was very bitter and tremulous with which I acknowledged the caricature and satire on myself.

So here I was content to stay, unsettled, doubtful, knowing nothing of what my life—or more than *my* life, my boy’s—was to be, waiting if perhaps he would come or send, or make some appeal to me. Perhaps, I cannot tell—perhaps if he had, my old perversity might have

still returned, and I rejected it ; but he did not try me—and I could form neither plan nor purpose for the vague, dim future. I persuaded myself that I left it in God's hands, but I searched its dull horizon with my wistful eyes, day by day.

And then another thing, a fanciful yet not light dread, weighed upon me. When I sat in the sunshine on the bank of the river adjusting my baby's veil, laying it back from his sweet face, as he lay sleeping on my knee, with my ungloved hand, I shuddered at the sinister gleam of the diamond upon his innocent brow. My imagination was excited and restless ; it did seem a sinister gleam as it flashed upon the innocent sleeper, and all the curse of the story returned to my mind, no more as a mere visionary legend, a tale half believed, half smiled at, but as a real hereditary curse. Suppose I should die, and my husband marry some sweet loving wife who would make up to him for all he had suffered with me—once I used to persuade myself that I would be glad of

that—and my boy should have another brother, who was not his mother's son? When I took this possibility into my mind and pondered it, I almost thought, like the unhappy lady to whom it came first, that this fatal jewel blazed at me with malignant splendour like the eye of an evil spirit. No reasonings of mine could shake my terror of it. I was not wise enough, nor sufficiently courageous to banish this fanciful apprehension from my mind—and I trembled, and a cold dew of pain came upon my face as I thought of the lifelong enmity and strife which might be perpetuated in this child, doubly a Southcote as he was, and born in an atmosphere disturbed and clouded by the ceaseless discord of his race.

This day I was seated at my usual post on a grassy bank near the river. Baby lay in my lap asleep, his rich veil laid back round the edge of his hat, showing his sweet innocent face in a nest of lace and ribbons, warm with the subdued sunshine which fell intensely on his white cloak and robes, and upon me, but

which I carefully held a little parasol to shield from his head. There was a slight fantastic breeze about, crisping the water, and blowing in small warm capricious gusts, now from one quarter, now from another. As usual, the river was bright with many passengers, and some pleasure-boats were setting out from our little bay—for there were now some London people in the village, which was a tiny watering-place in its quiet way. I had newly taken my seat, after a considerable walk, and was just drawing my glove from my hand to put back a stray morsel of the down which we called hair from baby's forehead. My hands were still thin, and my ring had always been loose on my finger; this time, as it happened, it came off with the glove—and a little gust of wind rising at the moment, my glove blew away from me as I pulled it off, and the ring fell and rolled glistening down over the knoll to the edge of the beach, where it lay among the pebbles gleaming and sparkling like a living thing.

I never paused to lift my glove—I snatched


up my baby hurriedly and almost ran away. I would not look back, lest I should see some one find it, and be obliged to acknowledge it as mine—but hastened along as if I had been stealing instead of only losing this precious ornament; I am sure I felt as guilty—for this was not an innocent and *bona-fide* loss, and I trembled between hope and terror. I had been out for some time, and, truth to speak, Master Harry had momentarily fatigued the arms of his Mamma. Then the capricious wind chose this time of all others to loose my hair from under my bonnet and catch a wild, half-curved lock to sport with—and I had no glove upon my right hand, the only one which baby's ample vestments permitted to be visible. In this case I hurried on, meeting a London nursemaid with some wild pretty children, who drew herself up in conscious superiority—meeting the Rector's pony carriage, with Mrs Rector in it, who nodded to me with her usual amused disapproving look, and, I was very certain, laughed when I was past.

Somehow or other I almost enjoyed these interruptions, as I hastened homeward with my gloveless hand and my face flushed with haste and exercise. I certainly could not have looked much like a miserable forsaken wife, or a self-consuming, passionate misanthrope when I reached our cottage door.

The brightest face in the world was looking out for me at the window—Flora! Flora Ennerdale! what could bring her here? But I had scarcely time to ask the question when she ran out to meet me, as eager and joyful as her sweet, affectionate nature could be. Flora seized upon my ungloved hand, and stood looking at me in her pretty shy way to see if I would kiss her. I did, this time, with real love and pleasure; and baby!—she took him, though I only half consented, out of my arms, with a natural instinct for it, yet not with the perfect skill which I flattered myself I had attained to—and insisted upon carrying him in, very proud and delighted, to the little parlour, where she had already made herself quite at

home, but where her mother's elderly maid, who had come with her, sat very dainty and frigid, much more disgusted with our penurious appointments than Flora was. For the first moment I was conscious of nothing but pleasure in seeing her; but then I began to inquire within myself and to wonder—who had told her? who had sent her? was she the investigating dove, the messenger to tell if the floods had abated?—a momentary pang of pique and jealous pride made me look gravely at Flora; but it was impossible to look at her sweet, innocent face, and think of any hidden design. No, she would tell me honestly why she came—I was sure of that.

When Alice came in, Flora's respectable attendant condescended to withdraw with her, and we were left alone. Flora had thrown down her bonnet and shawl upon the haircloth sofa, where she now hastily placed mine, after disrobing me with her own hands. I took my low nursing-chair, for I had now regained baby, but Flora stood before the



window in her wide, floating, pretty muslin gown, so summerlike and girl-like; she was not disposed even to stand still, much less to sit down for a reasonable conference, and all this while was running on with her pleasant voice and happy words, as light of heart as ever.

“Oh, cousin Hester, how beautiful it is,” she cried; “how did you find out such a lovely quiet place? and such ships! I have heard the boys speak of ships, but I thought there was always something nasty and noisy about them. I could look at these all day—how they float! what beautiful round sails—is that the wind in them that fills them out so?—and how they seem to enjoy it, cousin Hester!”

“How did you find me out, Flora?” I asked.

Flora hesitated for a moment, and then suddenly came and knelt down beside me. “Dear cousin Hester, Mr Southcote came and told Mamma all about it. You will not be angry, cousin? Mamma thought it was not right of you, and Mr Southcote came and explained it

to her, and said it was he that had been wrong, and that you had a right to be angry with him. Then he let us know when baby was born—oh, what a sweet rogue he is, cousin Hester!—do you think there ever was such a pretty baby?—and then we had to come to London—about—about—some business, and I teased Mamma till she let me come to see you. I did so want to see you, and I had something to tell you, too.”

“What had you to tell me, Flora?” I asked, stiffening into pride again. This of course was some message from my husband, and I could not explain why I felt aggrieved that he should choose *her* for his messenger.

Flora looked up wistfully into my face — “Have I said anything wrong—are you angry, cousin?”

“No, no—why should I be angry,” I answered, almost with impatience; “tell me what message you have.”

“Message! it is no message,” said Flora, her whole pretty face waking into blushes and

dimples; "it was all about myself, cousin Hester—I am so selfish; it was something that happened to me."

I saw how it was at once, and was relieved. "Well, tell me what has happened," I said.

But Flora buried her pretty face and her fair curls in baby's long robes, and laughed a little tremulous laugh, and made no answer.

"Must I guess?" I asked, smiling at the girlish, sweet confusion. "I suppose, as people say, somebody has fallen in love with you—is that what has happened?"

She looked up for a moment with a glance of delighted astonishment—"How could you find it out, cousin Hester?" said Flora; "it looks very vain even to believe it; but, indeed—indeed, he says so—and I think it is the strangest thing in the world."

Her innocent surprise and joy brought tears to my eyes. I remembered myself the humility of a young heart wondering, wondering if this strange gift of gifts, the love of romance and poetry, could really have fallen to its own share;

yet Flora was so unlike me—and my eyes, worn with tears and watching, were they disenchanted now?

I stooped to kiss her sweet blushing cheek. “I must hear who he is, and all that you have to tell me,” said I. “Are they pleased at home?—and is he a hero and a paladin? It was very good of you to come and tell me, Flora.”

“No, he is not a hero,” said Flora—and then she paused and looked up in my face, and made a breathless appeal to me, clasping baby’s little soft hand within both her own; “Oh, cousin Hester, will you come home! it must be so dreadful to be parted—I can understand it now,” said Flora with her sweet blush. “Please, cousin Hester, dear cousin! what matter is it if Mr Southcote was wrong? he is so fond of you, he thinks there is no one like you; oh, will you come home?”

I was taken by surprise; I could not help crying as the eager young face looked up in mine. I was not in the least angry; but alas she did not know,—how could she know?

"Hush, Flora, hush," I said when I could speak; "hush, hush!" I could not find another word to say.

"You would be a great deal happier, cousin Hester," said Flora kissing my hand and clasping it with baby's between her own.

I only repeated that one word "Hush!" If my child himself had appealed to me I do not think I could have been more strangely moved.

She said no more, but sighed as she gave up her guileless endeavour; and now again the smiles and blushes came beaming back, and she told me of her own happiness; *he* was a young landed gentleman in their immediate neighbourhood, only five miles from Ennerdale, and if neither a hero, nor a paladin, had managed to make Flora very well contented with him, that was certain. And everything was so suitable, she said—and Mamma and Papa were so much pleased—and the boys were wild about it—and they had come up to London to supply the bride's wardrobe, and

it was from this delightful occupation that Flora had spared a day to visit me.

"And he has three sisters, cousin Hester," said Flora, "such pretty, good, nice girls—and they all live at the hall; we have always been *such* friends, especially Mary and I, and they will be such pleasant company, Oh! if you were only at Cottiswoode, I think I should have nothing more to wish for. I can see Mamma nearly every day, and Annie is almost old enough to take my place, and when Gus and the rest of the boys come home for the holydays, of course they will be as much at the hall as they are at Ennerdale—and *he* is as fond of them all as I am—and if you were at home, cousin Hester, I think I should be almost too happy."

The only thing I could do was to draw my hand caressingly over the happy, pretty head before me. Flora could go on in her pleasant talk without any help from me.

"So that will be one thing to hope for," said Flora; "you might come and see *me*,

cousin Hester. Mamma is so busy getting everything, that she could not come down with me to-day; such quantities of things, I cannot think what I shall do with them—and you know I never had a great many dresses before; just look what a child I am,” cried Flora, springing up with a burst of laughter at herself, and opening a dainty little basket on the table, to bring out sundry bits of bright rich glistening silk. “I brought them to show to you, cousin; I know you don’t care for such things, but—but—you were always so kind to me.”

I was not so philosophical as Flora supposed. I think myself that however universal the feminine love of dress may be, it is never so perfectly developed as in a happy young wife who has her babies to adorn and decorate as well as herself. Though I was far from happy, I felt the germ of this within me, and was not at all indifferent to Flora’s pretty specimens. We were soon deep in a discussion of laces and satins, and fashions, matters in which Flora

was so delighted to have my advice, and I so willing to give it; the forenoon went on very pleasantly while we were thus occupied. I was pleased and drawn out of myself, and I had always been very fond of Flora; the sight of her happiness was quite a delight to me.

When baby had taken *his* refreshment and been laid to sleep in his cradle—he was not much more than a month old, and slept a great deal, as I suppose, healthy, vigorous children generally do—Flora went up to my room with me, for I wanted to give her some little present, such as I had; Flora was somewhat amused at the bare little room, the scanty white dimity hangings, and clean poverty of everything—and at baby's little bath, and the pretty basket which at present held his night-things only. “Do you do everything for him yourself?” she asked wonderingly. “Do you know, cousin Hester, I should think that was so very pleasant—and to carry him about out of doors, as you were doing; oh I should so like to be your nursemaid, cousin!”

"Well, Flora?" I said, inquiringly, for she had stopped with hesitation, as if she wanted to ask something of me.

"Perhaps you would not like it, dear," said Flora, in her caressing way; "but I should not be at all hurt if you said so. O I should like so much to come here for a few days! I could sleep on the sofa, I could help Alice, I always was handy—and I know you would let me carry baby sometimes when you went out. Will you write to mamma now, and ask her to let me come? O cousin Hester, do!"

"But, Flora, your mamma does not approve of me," said I, with an involuntary blush.

Her countenance fell a little. "Indeed I did not say so, cousin Hester," she explained, though with an embarrassment which made it very evident to me that I was right. "She thought it wrong of you to go away, but it was different after Mr Southcote told her—and she is so very sorry for

you, dear cousin, and says she is sure you are not happy. Oh indeed it was not at all hard to persuade her to let me come to-day! I am very bold to beg for an invitation, but I do so wish to come; cousin, you will write?"

"It would do me good to have you with me, Flora," I said, sadly; "but I think I have grown very foolish and nervous. I am almost afraid to write to your mamma. I fancy *she* cannot see anything to excuse me—happy people are sometimes not the best judges, and she has never been very wretched, I am sure. And then, what would *he* say? nobody can think well of me in Cambridgeshire; *he* would not like to have his young bride staying here. I am sure he would not, Flora."

"Say you would rather I did not come, cousin Hester," said Flora, who was nearly crying; "don't say such cruel things as *that*."

"Yet they are true," I said; "I know what I have lost, and that few people can think

well of me. It will be better not, dear Flora, though it would be a great happiness to me. Now come here—this was my mother's, and I have sometimes worn it myself. You like to be called like her, Flora—will you wear it for her sake?"

As I spoke I clasped upon her pretty neck the little gold chain, with its diamond pendant, which I had been so proud to wear on that first fated night when I met Harry. She had not yet dried her few bright tears of disappointment and sympathy, and one fell upon the gems, making them all the brighter. She still cried a little as she thanked me. I knew it was a gift to please her greatly, for pretty as it was itself, and valuable, it had an additional charm to her affectionate heart.

"And for your sake, cousin—am I not to like it for your sake?" cried Flora; "I love to hear of *her*—but I love you, your very own self—may I wear it for your sake?"

I answered her gratefully, as I felt; but as I

opened the case which held my mother's jewels, the same case which my father had given me in Cambridge, and which I had always carried about with me since—my eye fell upon Mr Osborne's present, the little chain with my mother's miniature ; my heart was softened ; I was a mother myself, and knew now the love above all loves which a mother bears to her child—and I was terribly shaken on my own original standing-ground, and at the bottom of my heart knew myself bitterly, cruelly wrong. My father, it was possible to fancy, might have been even more wrong than I was ; and Flora's sweet face, like hers, yet wanting something of the perfect repose and sweetness which this little picture showed, was the last touch that softened me. When I put my mother's diamond ornament on Flora's neck, I clasped the miniature on my own. With my plain dress and total want of ornament—for I had not even a ring except my wedding-ring—the simple little chain and the circle of pearls round the miniature, made a great show. Flora came eagerly to look at it—

I had never shown it to her before ; she thought it so beautiful—so sweet !—she never could be so vain as to let any one say she was like my mother after seeing that.

And then we returned downstairs to the early homely dinner which Alice had been at considerable trouble with. Alice was much disturbed and humbled by the invasion of these visitors ; she did not like the idea of any one finding us in our new circumstances—and Flora's maid was a great affliction to Alice. " She could have borne the young lady," she said, " but all the servants at Ennerdale and all the servants at Cottiswoode—*everybody* would know that Mrs Southcote kept no nurse for her baby, and lived in a house of four apartments, and waited on herself." It was very galling to Alice—but she forgot it in the secret glow of delight with which she observed the miniature I wore.

Flora did not leave me till it was quite evening, and even then not without another petition that I would "ask Mamma" to let her come for a longer visit. It was a great

piece of self-denial, but I steadily resisted her entreaties. I felt sure that Mrs Ennerdale, a placid unawakened woman, who knew nothing of me nor of my struggles, could have no sympathy for me—and I rather would want the solace of Flora's company than expose her to her mother's disapprobation. I had voluntarily left my husband and my own house, perhaps with no sufficient cause, and I sternly doomed myself to a recluse's life, and determined to involve no one in any blame that belonged to me.

In the early evening, when the sun had just set—baby, by this time, having had his full share of attendance, and Flora herself, by especial favour, having been permitted to place him in his cradle—I set out with her to the railway, which was at a considerable distance from the village. But when we were ready to go, I suddenly remembered that I had but one glove, and Alice as suddenly perceived the want upon my finger. “Do you not wear your ring to-day, dear,” whispered Alice, looking at me anxiously as she put my shawl round me. In

the same whispering tone, but with guilt at heart, I answered, "I lost it by the river this morning," and Alice uttered a subdued cry of joy. I had happily forgotten it through all the day, but when it occurred to me I felt considerably disturbed and timid. I could not persuade myself I had lost it honestly. I fancied I could still see it gleaming among the pebbles at the water's edge where I could so easily have picked it up—and if it did come back to me after this, I fancied I should, more than ever, think it a fate.

We had a long pleasant walk in the peaceful sweet evening. Flora's influence over me had always been good—to-night she made me almost as light of heart as herself—and we parted with a great many hopes on her part of seeing me again before she left London, and with a good deal of sadness on mine. When I turned back alone, I found even a tear hanging upon my eyelash. Her young, sweet, unshadowed hope was a great contrast to mine, but that was not what made me sad ; I liked Flora—she seemed

to connect me at once with the bright girlhood and young womanhood of which, in my solitary life, I had known so little—and it grieved me to think that for a long time, perhaps for ever, I might not see her again. Natural likings and desires came upon me so strangely in that unnatural position : I should have liked to go to Flora's marriage, to help her in her preparations, to do all that young people, friends to each other, delight to do on such occasions ; and the thought that her mother now, and, most likely, her husband hereafter, would rather discourage Flora's affection for me, was rather a hard thought. As I turned my face homeward, the peaceful evening light was falling into shadow over these quiet houses ; from the church there once again came that faint inarticulate sound of music, solitary chords, struck at intervals, vibrating through the homely building and through the harmonious quiet of the air—and everything, except the passing ships, was at rest and at home. I turned my wistful eyes to them, perpetual

voyagers! my overlaid heart followed them as they glided out to the sea. Distance, space, blank void and far! I thought of the wilds of my own country, and of the endless, breathless travel, the constant journey on and on to the very end of the world, which my girlish fancies had thought upon so often. It seemed for a moment as though that, and that only, could ease the restless disquiet in my breast.

"Mrs Southcote—I beg your pardon for interrupting you so abruptly," said our village doctor, coming up hastily to me, and perceiving how I started at the sound of his voice, which recalled me to myself, "did you lose a ring to-day? My wife picked up this on the beach. It is yours, I think."

I looked at him with blank dismay; though I did not look at the glittering jewel in his hand, of course I knew at once that it was mine—that it must be mine—and that malicious fate returned the curse to me. It was no use trying to deny or disown this fatal gem.

Malicious fate ! what words these were. I sickened at the passion and rebellious force that still was in my heart.

“ Yes,” I said, almost with resentment, “ yes, thank you, it is mine”—but I did not hold out my hand for it. The doctor looked amazed, almost distrustful of me. I was not comprehensible to him.

“ It seems of great value,” he said, with a slight, half-indignant emphasis, “ and even in the village, I dare say, it might have fallen into hands less safe than my wife’s. The river would have made small account of your diamond had the water come an inch or two higher. Ladies are seldom so careless of their pretty things, Mrs Southcote.”

He was an old man, and had been very kind to me. I did not wish to offend him, now that I recollected myself. “ It has very unpleasant recollections to me, doctor,” I said, as I put it on my finger ; “ I almost was glad to think I had lost it—but I thank you very much for taking the trouble ; and will you thank

Mrs Lister for me? it was very kind of her to pick it up."

The old doctor left me, more than ever bewildered as to my true character and position. I heard afterwards from the rector's wife, who was not above caricaturing and observing the village oddities, that he went home to the little house, which had been cast into great excitement half the day by finding this prize, completely dismayed by my indifference. "I was almost glad to think I had lost it!" Who could I be who thought so little of such a valuable ornament? the doctor and his household could not understand what it meant.

As for me, when I left him, my impulse was to tear it from my finger and fling it with all my force into the middle of the river. To what purpose? it would not be safe, I believed, even there; wilful losing would not do, as I had experienced already. With secret passion I pressed it upon my finger, as if extra precautions to secure it might, perhaps, answer my purpose; what a fiendish, malignant glare

it had to my excited eyes as I looked at it in the soft twilight! it seemed to gather the lingering light into itself, and turn upon me with a glow of defiance. When I reached home, where Alice had already lighted candles and put our little parlour in order, I held it up to her as I entered. I believe I was quite pale with fright and passion. "See, it has come back to me," I said, "it will not be lost."

Alice was not so much dismayed as I was. "I feared it would be found," she said; "but patience, dear, there is but one heir to Cottiswoode, and it's worn on a woman's hand."

I had to content myself, of course; but I scarcely liked to put up my hand, with that ring upon it, to my neck, where hung my mother's miniature. Alice's eye followed me, as I did it once, and her face lightened up. "If the ring is the sign of strife, the picture is peace itself, Miss Hester," she said with a faltering voice. I almost thought so myself; how strange it was to wear these two things together!

THE FIFTH DAY.

My baby was very ill. He had been seized a week before, but we had not apprehended anything. Now we were closely shut up in my bed-room, trying to shield every breath of air from him, keeping up the fire though it was only September, while I sat by the fireside holding him on my knee, watching the changes of his face, his breathing, his movements, with frightful anxiety, and reproaching myself, oh, so bitterly! for that one last walk, which had brought this illness upon him. He had taken a violent cold, and I could not but see, by the anxiety of the doctor, by the gravity of Alice, and the pitying tender look which she cast upon me, how they thought it would end. When I awoke from my security to think of this, I

dare not describe the misery that came upon me. I had talked of misery and hopelessness before, but what were all the griefs in the world to this one? To look at him and think he might be taken from me—to look upon those sweet features, which might be, bye and bye, removed from my eyes for ever; oh, heaven, that agony! that was the bitterness of death.

He had rallied two or three times and relapsed again, so that we were even afraid to trust the appearance of recovery when such appeared—but there was no sign of recovery now. It was just dawn, very early in the morning, and we had been watching all night. I had made Alice lie down, and baby was in a disturbed and painful slumber. As I sat watching him, restraining my very breath lest it should make him uneasy as he lay upon my lap, my eye wandered to the cold gray sky, over which the morning light was flushing faintly—and it came to my mind how I had watched the dawn upon this day twelvemonth,

my wedding-day. The sweet serenity of that morning came back to my recollection, the agitation of my own mind, which, great as it was, was happy agitation still—and my trust, my hope unbounded, my perfect confidence in Harry, my fearlessness of any evil—yet, that was the beginning of sorrows; now the fear in my heart shook the very foundations of the earth; if such a calamity came, there was no light, no hope beyond it. I had come to love life for my baby's sake—even now I know I made a great painful effort to say I would be resigned and content with God's will, whatever it was—but I felt in my heart that life would be only a loathing and disgust to me; oh, heaven have pity upon me! what would I have in all the world if my baby was taken away?

Every fleeting change that there was—every momentary alteration—I wanted to have the doctor, or to call Alice to ask what they thought now. Then I remembered vaguely the name, the Great Physician,—and that however far others might be, he was near at all times; oh, if

I only could have got to his feet, as they did in Palestine in those blessed days when He was there! if I could but have thrown myself on the earth before him, and cried, "my child! my child!" I said so in my prayer; from my very despair, I caught boldness. I cried with my heart, till it fainted with that agony of asking.—Praying for your child's life, do you know what it is?

There was no difference, no difference! and the pallid light was growing on the sky, and the first sounds of life began to break upon the stillness; then I was stayed in my prayers as by an invisible hand. I cannot tell how or why these words came to my mind, but they came with a terrible force, making me silent, shutting my mouth in an instant: "If I regard sin in my heart, the Lord will not hear me." I was appalled by the sudden sentence; was there no hope, then? no hope? did I not even dare to appeal to Him who never before cast any suppliant away?

I was struck dumb; I sat still in a breathless,

hopeless pause of dismay, my heart suddenly yielding to this dreary calamity. In a moment there came upon me a fearful vision of what might be ; my life bereaved, my hope lost—Heaven and the ear of God shut upon me. I knew what was right, and I had not done it—I was self-convicted of wrong, but I did not change my course—I was crying wildly to God for the blessing which He alone could grant, but I was still regarding sin in my heart.

At this moment Alice woke and hastily rose ; she saw no change in baby—he was just the same, just the same—oh, those dreadful, hopeless words ! but I consented she should take him upon her lap, and 'myself' went downstairs—though not to rest, as she said. I went with a faint, desperate hope that perhaps if I were absent a few minutes I might perceive a favourable change when I returned. I went into the cold deserted parlour, which already looked so uninhabited, so miserable, and where baby's unused cradle stood in the chill morning light, reminding me, if I had

needed to be reminded, of the sweet days that were past, and of the frightful shadow which was upon us now. I knelt down upon the floor beside it. I did more than kneel; I bent down my very head upon the ground—I could not find a position low enough, humble enough. I tried to persuade myself that He was here indeed, that I was at His feet, where the woman which was a sinner came; but my cry was baulked and my words stayed by that great unchangeable barrier; ah, the woman which was a sinner was not then regarding sin in her heart.

I could not bear this intolerable oppression; my prayers and cries must have outlet one way or another. I raised up my head, almost as if I were addressing some mortal enemy who had whispered these words into my mind. “I will go home—I will humble myself to my husband,” I cried aloud. “I do not care for pride—I will humble myself—I will humble myself!” While I was speaking my tears came in a flood, my troubled brain was lightened—and

when I laid down my head again and covered my face with my hands, I felt at least that I could pray.

I am not sure that I could have been five minutes absent altogether, but when I went back I was sick with the eager breathless hope which had risen in my mind. There was no ground for it; he was no better; but I took him in my lap again with patience, trying to put the dreadful shadow off from me. The dawn brightened into the full morning; then came the dreadful noon with all its brightness; the doctor came and went; the hours passed on—and the baby lived—that was all.

And now I could not pray any longer; my mind had sunk into a feverish stupidity; I was alive to nothing but the looks of my child; yes, and to one thing beside. I had a strange, helpless feeling of clinging to “the Great Physician;” the name was in my mind, if nothing more; it was not prayer, it was not faith; I could not say it was anything mental or spiritual at all; I rather felt as if something held

me, as if I were clinging to a cord or to the skirts of a robe; as if I was only thus prevented from plunging into some dreadful abyss of despair and ruin; and my dumb, strange, almost stupid dependence, was upon Him solely—only upon Him.

I was waiting, waiting; I did not dare to say to myself that baby lay more quietly; I dared not look up at Alice, or ask her what she thought; but the doctor came again when it was nearly evening, and as I watched his face my heart grew sick. Oh, yes, it was hope—hope! I scarcely could bear it; and when the old man said real words—real true words, not fancies—that he was a great deal better, I think I had very nearly fainted.

But it was quite true; he improved gradually all that afternoon; he began to look like himself again; rapidly as he had grown ill, he grew better; I suppose it always is so with young children; and when I sat by the fire at night with him, he put up his dear little hand again to catch at my mother's miniature,

as he had done before his illness. "Oh, my darling, give God thanks!" said Alice, as she sat on a stool by me, not able to control her tears. I had, indeed, an unspeakable thankfulness in my heart, but I could not give expression to it—words would not come. "Lips say God be pitiful, that ne'er said God be praised!" Is that true, I wonder? I was very, very grateful, but I could not find words as I did in the agony of my prayers.

And now I returned to the resolution I had come to when baby fell asleep. Oh, that sweet, hopeful sleep! to look at it was enough for me! I sat over the fire pondering on what I had to do. Then it occurred to me how unjust I had been. This dear, precious child, without whom my life would be a blank and hateful; this little creature, who had been to me a fountain of every sweet and tender influence; who had made my days joyful, burdened though they were,—was my husband's child, by as close and dear a tie as he was mine. I had no right to keep for myself, and for my own enjoyment,

this sweetest gift of Providence, which was not bestowed on one of us more than another, but which was given to both. If he had wronged me, he had not wronged his child; and I bowed my head in shame to think how I had broken even my own rules of justice; but I could restore my husband to his rights. Without being conscious that this was still another salve to my own pride, I took up eagerly this view of the matter; I would humble myself to say that I was wrong—to return to Cottiswoode—to acknowledge how unjust I had been, and to share with my husband the care of our child; and then, when my heart ached with thinking that right and wrong were not the only things to build household peace upon, imagination came in to charm me with dreams of what he would do and say. How he would once more seek the heart which once was given to him so freely; how he would come to my feet again as he had done a year ago. Ah, this was our very marriage-day!

I wondered how he was spending it—where?—if he was all by himself at Cottiswoode—

perhaps in that library, in the chair where I had placed myself, leaning upon the desk, where I leant the day I came away—perhaps writing to me—surely thinking of me; yes, I did not think he could let this day pass without wishing for me over again—and I wondered if I could get home before his appeal should reach me; for already I could imagine him writing a loving, anxious letter, full of the memories of to-day.

What a strange difference! a pleasant excitement of plans and hopes was busy in the mind which only this morning had been lost in such despairing supplications. I think I had only risen the higher in the rebound for the depth of suffering to which I fell before. The idea of the journey, the return, the joyful surprise to my husband, the joy to myself of perceiving his delight in little Harry, the satisfaction of Alice, and my own content in being once more at home, and carrying with me the heir of Cottiswoode, woke pleasure new and unaccustomed in my heart. I did not question myself about it, I did not pause to think of any humiliation, I per-


mitted the tide of natural gladness to rise at its own sweet will ; I thought any degree of joy, and every degree, was possible, when I had thus regained, from the very shadow of death, my beautiful boy.

“ I won’t have you sit up to-night, Miss Hester,” said Alice, who had returned to sit beside me, and gaze at him, but who did not disturb my thoughts ; “ you must lie down, darling—he’ll have a good night, I’m sure ; and I’ll sleep in the big chair, it’s very comfortable ; now, dear, lie down, you’re wearied out.”

“ No, indeed, I am not even tired,” I said ; “ I want nothing but to sit and look at him, Alice. Oh, is it not a delight to see him now ? ”

“ Ay, dear,” said Alice slowly and sadly ; “ ay, Miss Hester, especially for them that have seen the like of him pass to heaven out of their own arms.”

I knew now what the griefs of Alice’s life must have been. I, who had so often thought lightly of them in comparison with the troubles which I had brought upon myself. I knew better now. I took her hand into my own, and pressed



it close, and kissed it—that dear, kind, careful hand!

“Don’t, darling, don’t,” cried Alice, in a voice choked with tears; “Oh, Miss Hester, have you given thanks to God?”

“I am very thankful, very thankful, Alice,” said I humbly, and there was another pause. “Alice, when do you think he would be able to travel?” I asked at last; “perhaps a change might do him good—do you think so? how soon do you think we could go?”

“Are we to go to another strange place, Miss Hester?” said Alice, with a little dismay: “Dear, I think you should rather stay here; we’re known here now, and nobody takes particular note of us; but to see a young lady like you with a baby, and all by yourself, makes people talk; and I wouldn’t go to a strange place, darling—it’s very pleasant here.”

“I did not think of going to a strange place, Alice,” said I.

“Then you thought of Cambridge, Miss Hester,” continued Alice, rapidly; “for my part, I’ve no heart to go back to Cambridge,

I'd rather go anywhere than there; they'd say it was to vex Mr Southcote you went—they say a deal of malicious things—and everybody knows us there; and it's a dreary house for you to go back to, dear—you'd be sure to feel it so, even with baby. My darling, don't go there; I've come to like this little place—we have it all to ourselves—and now it's like home."

"Then do you think there is no other home I have a right to, Alice?" I asked. I felt very much cast down and humbled because she never seemed to think of that. Perhaps, indeed, I *had* no right to go back to the home I had left.

"If you mean that—if you can think of that, Miss Hester"—cried Alice, in a tremulous voice.

"Should I not think of it? will he not permit me to live there again?" said I, not without some pride, though with more sadness. "I suppose you know my husband's purposes better than I do; Alice, it is a sad state of matters; but I have been very wrong, and even though he should refuse to admit me, I must go; I have

been very unjust to him; my baby belongs as much to him as to me. I have deprived my husband of his rights, and now I must restore them to him."

"I do not understand you, Miss Hester," said Alice, looking almost frightened.


"Baby has a father as well as a mother, Alice," I repeated; "and I am wronging my husband. I know he has seen little Harry, but he ought to be able to see him every day as I do. I have no right to keep my darling all to myself; he belongs to his father as much as to me—so I have made a vow to go home."

"Only because it is right, Miss Hester?" asked Alice.

"Do you think anything else would conquer me," I cried, keeping back my tears with an effort. "I could die by myself without murmuring. I don't ask to be happy, as people call it; but I will not do him injustice—he has a right to his child."

After this petulant speech, which, indeed, excited and unsettled as I was by the sudden

idea that my husband might not desire to receive me, I could not restrain, I settled myself in my chair, and half from pure wilfulness, half because my mind was so much occupied that I had no inclination for rest, I made Alice lie down, and continued in the chair myself. Hushed the nestling close to my breast, baby slept the sweet sleep of returning health and ease; and my thoughts were free to speculate on my plans. Could it be possible that bringing his son, his heir, with me—or, indeed, coming myself in any guise—I would be unwelcome at Cottiswoode? The thought was overwhelming. I was almost seized again with the same dreadful spasm of heartache and weakness which had attacked me on the day of baby's birth. Was it possible?—was it complete alienation, and not mere separation?—had I estranged his heart entirely from me? More than that, the fiend began to whisper; it was all deception—it was all a generous impulse—he never did love me at all—he was only anxious to restore to me my lost inheritance,



to make up to me for all he had deprived me of.

I tried to fly from the evil suggestion ; I put up my hand to feel for my mother's miniature, as if it could help me. This hurried, anxious motion awoke baby. Oh, I was well punished ! He cried a great deal, and woke up thoroughly, and his crying brought on a coughing fit ; it was nearly an hour before we had composed and lulled him to sleep again, for Alice had started up instantly on hearing his voice. All my terrors were roused by this, though it was rather a little infantine temper and fretfulness than anything else. I fancied I had brought it all upon myself ; I trembled with a superstitious dread before the wise, and kind, and pitiful Providence which guided me, as if my own constant transgressions were being followed by a strict eye, and quick retribution. Oh, pity, pity !—what was justice to such as me ? and what would become of me who dared to judge others, if God dealt with myself only as I deserved ?

Then I made up my mind firmly and steadily once more—however I was received there, to go to Cottiswoode, and if my husband did not object, to remain there, that neither of us might lose our child. One wild impulse of giving up my baby to him, and fleeing myself to the end of the earth, was too dreadful to be more than momentary. No, I would go to Cottiswoode; I would tell him that I had wronged him—I would offer him all the justice it was in my power to give. It was now past midnight, and baby was once more fast asleep. Alice was sleeping—everything was perfectly still, except the faint crackling of the fire. Once or twice I had already dropped asleep myself for a few moments, when there was no urgent claim upon my attention, carrying my restless thoughts into dreams as restless. Now I suppose I must have fallen into the deep slumber of exhaustion, holding my baby fast in my arms, for I remember no more of that day.

And that was how I spent the first anniversary of my bridal day.

THE SIXTH DAY.

It was now late in September, a true autumnal day, just such a day as one of those which had carried us joyfully over foreign rivers and highways a year ago—when Alice and I made our final preparations and set out on our journey home. The owner of the house—the widow lady—had returned on the previous evening, and she was very well satisfied with the rent I paid her in place of the “notice” to which she was entitled. Baby was perfectly well—I think even stronger and more beautiful than ever—and though I trembled with nervous excitement, anticipating this new step I was about to take, I was tolerably composed, considering everything that was involved. It was very early—I think not much after six o’clock—when we sat down

at our homely breakfast-table—I with baby on my lap, fully equipped and well wrapped up for his journey, and Alice with an odd variety of little parcels about her, and far too much agitated to eat anything now, though she had carefully provided herself with a basket of “refreshments” to persecute me withal upon the way. The sunshine slanted with its golden gleam upon the river and the half-awakened houses on the water’s edge. There were no ships in sight, but only a vacant pleasure-boat, flapping its loose sail idly on the morning wind, and rocking on the rising water as the morning tide came in upon the beach. The air was slightly chill, and fresh as it only is at that hour, and the sun, slanting down upon house after house, shining upon curtained windows and closed doors, seemed calling almost with a playful mockery upon the sleepers. Our little bustle and commotion, the excitement in our pale faces, and the eventful journey before us, though they were not unsuitable for the opening of a common laborious day, bore yet a strange contrast to *this* charmed hour,

which was almost as sweet and full of peace as the evening. I stood by the window for a moment, looking out wistfully on the landscape which had grown so familiar to my eyes—how sweet it was ! how the water rose and glistened, dilating with the full tide ! I suppose we have all picture-galleries of our own, almost surpassing, with their ideal truth, the accomplished works of art ; and I know that there is no more vivid scene in mine than that morning landscape on the Thames.

We had but one trunk when we came, but baby's overflowing wardrobe, and that pretty cradle of his, which it had cost us so much trouble to pack, added considerably to our encumbrances ; but I was glad to think Alice was not quite so helpless now as when I hurried her, stunned and frightened, away from the peaceful home which she had never left before. It was so strange to go over these rooms, and think it was for the last time ; these little humble rooms, where so much had happened to us—where baby had been born !

Stranger still it was to find ourselves travelling, rushing away from our quiet habitation and our banished life. Then, London ; Alice was upon terms of moderate acquaintanceship with London now—she had been here all by herself to provide baby's pretty dresses—so that this was now her third time of visiting it. I was very anxious to lose no time, for there was a long drive between the railway and Cottiswoode, and I wished to arrive before night. In spite of myself new and pleasant emotions fluttered within me ; uncertain as I was how my husband would receive me—painful as it was on many accounts to ask him to admit me once more to my proper place—I still could not help contriving, with a mother's anxious vanity, and with a deeper feeling too, that baby should look well, and not be fretful or tired when his father for the first time saw him in my arms ; so we scarcely waited at all in London. My heart began to beat more wildly when we were once more seated in the railway carriage, and proceeding on our way to Cambridge ; for a little

while I was speechless with the tumult of agitation into which I fell. Was it real, possible? unasked and uncalled for, was I going home?

We had arranged to stop at a little town where we were quite unknown, and where we were sure to be able to get a chaise to Cottiswoode; I do not think half-a-dozen words passed between us while we dashed along through this peaceful country at express speed; baby slept nearly all the way—the motion overpowered him, and I was very thankful that he made so little claim upon my attention; when he did wake we were nearly at the station, and Alice took him and held him up at the window. When he was out of my arms I bowed down my head into my hands, and cried, and tried to pray; how my heart was beating! I scarcely saw anything about me, and the din of opening and shutting the carriage doors, the porter shrieking the name of the station, and the bustle of alighting, came to me like sounds in a dream. I stirred myself mechanically and gathered up our parcels, while Alice carefully

descended from the carriage bearing baby in her arms. Alice with careful forethought considered my dignity in the matter, and for myself I was not displeased at this moment to be relieved from the charge of my child.

How pretty he looked, holding up his sweet little face, looking round him with those bright eyes of his ! even in my pre-occupation I heard passing countrywomen point him out to each other ; my heart swelled when I thought of taking him home, and placing him in his father's arms. Alas, alas ! that father, how would he look at me ?

We had come to a very small town, scarcely more than a village, save for one good inn in it ; it had once been on the high road to London, but the railway had made sad failure of its pretensions. Here, however, we did not find it difficult to get a postchaise, and I made Alice take some refreshments while we waited for it ; I could not take anything myself ; I could not rest nor sit still ; I took baby in my arms, and paced about the long,

large deserted room we were waiting in. Alice did not say anything, but as soon as she could, she got little Harry from me again. I was very impatient; I could not understand why they took so long to get ready—and it was now nearly two o'clock—but they told me they could drive in two hours to Cottiswoode.

At last we set off. I gave up baby entirely to Alice; I sat with my hand upon the open window looking intently out; I do not think I changed my position once during that entire two hours. My eyes devoured the way as we drove on—my sole impulse all the time was to watch how fast we went, to see how we drew nearer step by step and mile by mile. My own country! I leant out my head once and drew in a long breath of that wide, free air, coming full and fresh upon us from the far horizon. It seemed to be years instead of months since I had last been here.

When we began to draw very near—when once more we passed Cottisbourne and the Rectory, and made a circuit to reach the

entrance of the avenue, my heart beat so fast that I could scarcely breathe; I held out my arms silently to Alice, and she placed baby within them; I held him very close to me for an instant, and bent over him to gain courage; oh, my beautiful, innocent, fearless baby! nothing knew he of wrong, or punishment, of a guilty conscience, or a doubtful welcome. He lay looking up in my face smiling, as if to give me courage; but his smile did not give me courage. What I needed now was to compose and collect myself; or instead of telling my husband that I came to do him justice, I would make a mere appeal to his pity with my weakness and my tears—and that was what, even now, I could not do.

Down that noble avenue under the elm trees—and now we drew up at the door of Cottiswoode. I trembled exceedingly as I descended the steps, though I maintained an outward appearance of firmness. Mr Southcote was not at home, the man said, gazing at me in astonishment; I was struck with utter

dismay by this; I had never calculated on such a chance. I turned round to Alice with stunned and stupid perplexity to ask what we were to do.

But there was a rush from the hall, and the housekeeper and Amy and another woman-servant came forward, the younger ones hanging on the skirts of Mrs Templeton: "Master will be home immediately, Ma'am," cried the housekeeper; "it's a new boy, he don't know who he's a-speaking to. Please to let me take the dear baby; oh what a darling it is! and such rejoicings as we had when we heard of its being a son and heir. Master's but gone to the Rectory. I'll send off the chaise. Dear heart, Alice, show the way! my lady likes none so well as you."

I went in faintly. I would not give up my boy to any one of them. I had not a word or a look for the kind, eager women who followed me with anxious eyes I would not even go into the drawing-room, but turned hastily to the library. When I sat down at last in his

chair, I felt as if a few moments more would have overpowered me. I was here at home, under the kindly roof where I had been born, holding the heir of Cottiswoode in my arms, waiting for my husband; but my heart was dumb and faint with dismay, and I scarcely knew what I expected as I sat motionless before his table, looking at the materials and the scene of his daily occupations. I could not see a thing there which suggested a single thought of me. No—the desk on which I had laid my note was removed, modern books and papers lay on the table. I could almost fancy he had studiously removed everything which could remind him that I once was here.

My heart sank, my courage gradually ebbed away from me; but baby began to stir and murmur—he was not content to sit so quietly; and I was obliged to rise and walk about with him, though my limbs trembled under me. Then indeed—could it be in recollection of me? I saw a little table placed as mine used to be in the little windowed recess where I had spent

so much of my time when I was a girl—and on it a little vase with roses, those sweet pale roses from my favourite tree. I remembered in a moment how this room had looked on the autumn night when Edgar Southcote first came to Cottiswoode. Could this be in remembrance of that time, and of me?

I cannot tell how long I walked about with baby, acquiring some degree of composure amid my agitation, as my trial was delayed—though I was faint, exhausted, and weary in frame more than I could have fancied possible. I heard the chaise rumble heavily away, and the noise of carrying our luggage up stairs—I thought I could detect a whispering sound in the next room, as if Alice was being questioned; and in the large lofty house, with its wide staircases and passages, so different from the little refuge we had been lately accustomed to, the opening and closing of distant doors, and steps coming and going, echoed upon my heart. Once Alice entered to beg that she might have baby, while behind

came the housekeeper, entreating, with tears in her eyes, that I would take something. It cost me a great effort to ask them to leave me, for my lips were parched and dry, and I scarcely could speak; and they had given me a great shock, little as they intended it, for I thought it was my husband when I heard some one at the door.

So thus I continued walking about the room, doing what I could to amuse baby. I had neither removed my bonnet nor relieved him of his out-of-doors dress, but it almost seemed as though my sweet little darling knew that to cry would aggravate my distress—how good he was! springing and crowing in my arms, in spite of his encumbering dress.

At last I saw a shadow cross the window—my heart fluttered, bounded, was still, as I thought, for a moment—and then my husband was in the room.

I could not speak at first, my lips were so dry. I came to a sudden standstill in the middle of the room, gazing blankly at him,

and holding up the child. I saw nothing but astonishment in his face at my first glance; he came rapidly towards me, crying "Hester! Hester!" but that was all—he never bade me welcome home.

"I have been very wrong," I said, at last; "I have done you great injustice. I have prided myself on doing right, and yet I have been wrong in everything. I have come back to you to humble myself; he belongs to you as much as to me—he is your son, and I have been unjust and cruel in keeping him away from you; will you let me stay here, that we may both have our boy?"

When I began to speak of wrong and of injustice, he turned away with an impatient gesture and exclamation—but, by this time, had returned and was standing by me, listening, with his head bent, his eyes cast down, and a smile of some bitterness upon his mouth. When I stopped, he looked up at me—strange! he looked at *me*—not at my baby—not at his child!


"You have come to do me justice?" he said.

What did he mean? the tone was new to me, I did not comprehend it. I said, "Yes," humbly. I was overpowered with exhaustion, and could scarcely stand, but I suppose he thought me quite composed.

"This house is yours, Hester," he said with some emphasis: "it is unjust, since that is to be the word, to ask me such a question. You have come to do me justice, to restore to me some of my rights—I thank you, Hester; though I warned you once that I should not be satisfied with justice," he continued hurriedly, once more turning away from me, and making a few rapid strides through the room.


I should have been so relieved if I durst have cried! I was so worn out—so much weakened by fatigue and excitement; but I only stood still in my passive mechanical way, able to do no more than to hold baby fast, lest he should leap out of my arms.

In a minute after he came back again and



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stood by me, but not looking at me, leaning his hand on the table, as if he were preparing to say something ; for myself, I was exhausted beyond the power of making speeches, or reasoning, or explaining, or carrying on any sort of warfare ; I was reduced to the barest simplicity ; I put out my hand and touched his arm ; “ Will you not take him,” I said, holding out my baby ; “ Edgar, he is your son.”


He glanced at me a moment with the strangest mingling of emotions in his face. After that glance I no longer thought him cold and calm ; then he suddenly snatched baby from me, and kissed and caressed him till I feared he would frighten the child ; but he was not frightened, though he was only an infant, my bold, beautiful boy ! For myself, I sank into the nearest chair, and let my tired arms fall by my side. I almost felt as if I had not strength enough to rise again, and a dull disappointment was in my heart ; was it only to be justice after all ? Oh, if he would but come back to me ! if he would but forget his dignity,

and my right and wrong, and make one more appeal to my true self, to my heart, which yearned for something more than justice! But he did not; oh, and I knew in my heart he was very right! it was I who ought to be thoroughly humbled, it was I who ought to appeal to him; but I was different in my notions now—instinctively I looked for pity—pity, nothing better! and almost hoped that he would remember I was weak and fatigued, a woman, and the mother of his child.

By and bye he returned, carrying baby fondly in his arms—his face flushed with undoubted delight and joy. As he drew near to me he became graver, and asked me suddenly, “Why did you call me Edgar, Hester?”

“Because it is your proper name,” I said.

I felt that he looked at me anxiously to discover my meaning, but I had not energy enough to raise my head to give him a clearer insight into it. Then I fancied he gradually came to some understanding of what I meant. I never had addressed him by any name



since our first coming home. I would not. I could not call him Harry—and I had so little desire to make peace or to establish any convenient or natural intercourse, that I never tried to adopt the name by which I had always designated my cousin. Now, matters were different; I wanted to begin upon a new foundation; I wanted to put all the past, its dream of happiness and its nightmare of misery, alike out of my mind—and this was why I called him Edgar, not unkindly, rather with a sad effort at friendship. I think he partly understood me before he spoke again.

“Yes, it is my proper name—but so was the other; and the child? you have called your boy?”

“Harry,” I said, in a faltering tone.

He must have known it, but his eye flashed brightly from baby to me, once more with a gleam of delight. “Hester,” he said, bending over me as he placed my child in my arms again; “when you call me once more by that name, I will know that I have regained my bride.”

I bowed my head, partly in assent, partly to conceal the tears which stole out from under my eyelids even when I closed them. I enclosed my child in my arms, but I sat still. I had scarcely power or heart enough to raise myself from that chair.

"Are you ill, Hester?" he asked.

"No, only very tired," I said faintly. His lip quivered. I do not know how it was that the simplest common words seemed to move him so. He ran to the door of the room and called Alice, who was not far distant, to take baby, and then he offered me his arm very gently and kindly, and led me upstairs.

Mrs Templeton, the housekeeper, stood without, waiting. "Mrs Southcote has not taken a thing since she came, Sir," she said in an aggrieved tone; "please to tell her, Sir, it's very wrong—it's not fit for a young lady—and nursing the darling baby herself, too."


"Mrs Southcote is fatigued," said my husband, kindly, sheltering me from this good woman's importunities. "Will you have some-

thing sent upstairs, or shall you be able to come down to dinner, Hester? Nay, not for me," he added, lowering his voice, "I shall be sufficiently happy to know you are at home; and you are sadly worn out, I see. Little Harry has been too much for you, Hester."

"Oh, no, I have him always," I said quickly. Alice was carrying him upstairs before us, and he laughed and crowed to me from her arms. When I tried to make some answer to his baby signals, I saw his father look at me with strange tenderness. His father, yes; and I was leaning as I had not leant since the first month of our marriage upon my husband's arm.

Every face I saw was full of suppressed jubilee; they were almost afraid to show their joy openly, knowing that I—and, indeed, I suspect both of us—were too proud to accept of public sympathy either in our variance or our reconciliation, if reconciliation it was. The face of Alice was the most wondering, and the least joyous of all—she could not quite understand what this return was, or what it portended; she

did not accept it as her uninstructed neighbours did, merely as a runaway wife coming home, asking pardon and having forgiveness; and though her eyes shone with sudden brightness when she saw my husband supporting me, and some appearance of conversation between us, she was still perplexed and far from satisfied. My husband left me when we reached my room, and I gladly loosed off my bonnet and mantle, and laid myself down upon the sofa. It was evening again, and the sunshine was coming full in at the west window; the jessamine boughs were hanging half across it with their white stars, and the rich foliage beyond, just touched with the first tints of autumn, rose into the beautiful sky above. My own familiar room, where Alice's pretty muslin draperies had been, and where, a year ago, my husband had decked a bower for his unthankful bride—I saw all its graceful appointments now in strange contrast with the small white dimity bedroom in which I awoke this morning. How pleasant, I thought, *that* little house when first we went



to it! What an agreeable relief from the etiquettes and services of this statelier dwelling-place! I had become accustomed to the ways and manners of our homely life by this time, and the charm of novelty was gone from them—I found a greater charm on this particular evening, in looking about, while I lay overpowered with the langour of weariness on my sofa, upon the costly and graceful articles round me in “my lady’s chamber.” The second change was quite as pleasant as the first.

“So this is Cottiswoode, Alice,” I said, in a half reverie, “and we are at home.”

“Oh, never to leave it again, Miss Hester—never to leave it till God calls,” cried Alice, anxiously. “I don’t ask for a word, not a word, more than you’re ready to give; but, tell me, you’ve made up your mind to that, dear, and I’m content?”

“I shall never go away of my own will—no, happy or unhappy, it is right I should be here,” I said. “Does that satisfy you, Alice?”

“Miss Hester, I’d rather hear less of right,

and more of kindly wish and will," said Alice, with most unlooked-for petulance. "You oughtn't to be unhappy—God has never sent it—and it's time enough when He sends to seek grief."

I looked at her with a little astonishment, but took no notice of her momentary impatience—I had given her cause enough, one time and another; and now Amy came in with a tray, and something that Mrs Templeton was sure I would like, and another maid came with her to light a fire for the comfort of Master Harry. When the fire began to blaze, Alice undressed him, while I partook—and I was almost ashamed to feel, with some appetite—of the housekeeper's good things. Then I had a low easy chair drawn to the chimney corner, and a footstool, and took my baby back again—I think he looked even prettier in his nightgown and close cap. The dormant ambition to have him admired sprung up very strongly within me; and I think, but that poor little Harry was very hungry

and sleepy, I should have summoned courage to send him down stairs, as Alice suggested, "to bid his papa good night."

"What did they all say of him, Alice?" I asked.

"What could they say, dear?" said the impartial and candid Alice, appealing to my honour; "Mrs Templeton thought he was the sweetest little angel that ever was born; and as for the maids!—it's like bringing light into a house to bring a baby, Miss Hester. Blessings on his dear, sweet face! and he's the heir of Cottiswoode."

"Did anyone say who he was like?" I asked, timidly. This was a question I had never attempted to settle even in my own mind; though, like every other mother, I saw mind, and intelligence, and expression in the sweet little features, I never could make out any resemblance—I could not persuade myself that he was like his father.

"Well, he's very like the Southcotes, dear," said Alice, pronouncing an unhesitating yet

ambiguous judgment ; “ there’s a deal about his little mouth and his eyes ; and, Miss Hester, dear, what did his papa think of him ? ”

“ I think he was very glad, Alice,” I said, with a sigh. Why were we so far from what we should be ?—why, why, could we not discuss the beauty of our child as other young fathers and mothers did ? I had only *seen* the joy in Edgar’s face—he had not said a word to me on this subject, though it was the only subject in which there could be no pain.

After baby was laid to sleep in the cradle, I sat still by the fireside, musing by myself, while Alice went down stairs. I was left alone for a long time quite without interruption, but I did not make use of the interval as I might have done, to form my plans for our new life. I could not project anything ; a fit of ease and idleness had come upon me—wandering, disconnected fancies rather than thoughts were in my mind ; the exhaustion of the day had worn me out, and I was resting, reposing almost, more completely than if I had been asleep.

I almost thought that he would have come up stairs to see me once more and look at baby's sleep. I thought he ought to have come, for I was a stranger here—and my heart beat when I heard the step of Alice coming along the great roomy corridor—but it was only Alice; and when she had set candles upon the table, she came to me with the look of a petitioner—"Dear heart, the Squire's all by himself; won't you go down and sit an hour, Miss Hester?—maybe he thinks he must not come here."

I rose when Alice spoke to me, without once thinking of disobeying her. I was glad to be told to do it, though I scarcely should have moved of my own will. I was still in the very plain dress in which I had travelled, which was, indeed, the only kind of dress that I had worn since leaving Cottiswoode—with my mother's miniature at my neck, and that hereditary ring upon my hand. I paused nervously before the mirror a moment to see if my hair was in order. I looked pale, and somewhat worn-out—

and I wondered what he would think of my wearied, thoughtful face, so unlike what it used to be. Alice would fain have had me change my dress, which, indeed, was not very suitable for Cottiswoode—but I could not do that to-night.

When I went into the drawing-room, he was sitting moodily by himself, bending down with his arms upon the table, and his head resting upon them. He started when he heard me, lifted a thoughtful, clouded face, which made me think he had been fighting some battle with himself, and rose hurriedly to place a chair for me. We sat opposite to each other for a little time in awkward silence; a hundred things rushed to my lips, but I had not courage to say them, and I waited vainly till he should address me. At last I made a faint attempt at conversation; "What did you think of baby?" I asked, scarcely above my breath.

"Think of him—*think* of him!—opinion is out of the question," he cried in great haste and eagerness, as if I had broken a charm of

silence, and set him free; "He is your baby and mine, Hester, there is nothing more to be said. Let us understand each other," he continued hurriedly, drawing his chair close to the table with nervous agitation; "are we to endeavour to do our duty by each other—to live under the same roof, to fulfil our relative duties as justice and right demand? Is this the foundation we are to build upon, and is this all? tell me, Hester, let me know what it is."


"It is—yes, I suppose so," I answered faltering with confusion and almost fear; for he was more excited now than I had ever seen him. I could not have given any answer but assent—I could not, though my heart had broken for it.

For a long time after that nothing was said between us. I saw that he struggled and struggled vainly to subdue himself, and I, a strange new task to me, tried to do what I could to soothe him. I spoke of baby, of his illness, of our journey; I seemed to

myself another person, and almost felt as if I were playing a part, making this desperate attempt to get up a quiet conversation with my husband, while a whole ocean of unsettled principles lay still between us ; indifferent conversation ! for I even tried to direct him to the books upon the table—but I saw very well how little I made by my efforts, and how impossible it was that he could fully control and master himself till I went away.

When I had stayed long enough—it was hard to remain, it was hard to go away, I did not know which to choose—I went forward and held out my hand to him, to say good night. He took it and detained it, and looked up at me with again that doubtful impulse on his face ; would he speak ? No. He grasped my hand closely again, and let it fall.

“ I am poor company to-night, Hester, very poor company,” he said, turning hastily away ; “ but I thank you for your generous efforts—I shall be able to respond to them better to-morrow.”



And though he rose and opened the door, and attended me with the delicate respectfulness of old, that was all the good night I received from him. It cost me some tears when I reached to the shelter of my own room; yet my heart was strangely at ease, and would not be dismayed—and when I took my baby to my breast and went to sleep, I gave God thanks that we had come home.

THE SEVENTH DAY.

It was now October, and the weather was still very bright and pleasant. I had become quite settled and established once more at Cottiswoode—had resumed my former use and wont, and more than that—for though my life was still sadly meagre and deficient in one point, it still *was* life, and that was something. I might no longer wander everywhere with my baby in my arms, but I had elected the sweet-tempered and kind-hearted Amy to be his maid, and he was growing a great boy now, and soon fatigued me; though in our own rooms I kept possession of him still. But I had begun with better understanding and more discretion to help the poor people at Cottisbourne.

I had ceased to spend my days in a dream. I was active, and full of occupation. The nightmare had passed off from me, though some of its influences remained.

For in the most vital point of all we made little progress ; my husband and I were no nearer each other, had come to no better understanding. I studied his comfort now with the eagerest attention. I grew punctilious, formal, in my excess of care for him. I saw that he was served with devotion and humility as a prince might have been. I could not forgive any piece of neglect or forgetfulness in the household which touched upon his comfort. I almost think he knew how anxious I was, and attributed it—alas, were we never to know each other ! to my extreme desire to “do my duty,” to do him justice. He was, and yet he was not, right in judging me so. I was shut out from all the ordinary modes of showing my regard—we were on ceremonious terms with each other—and I wanted to prove to him that whatever bar-

riers there might be between us, there was always affection; what do I say?—I did not want to prove anything—I only did all I could, eagerly, timidly, and with anxious devotion—everything that I could for him. And he received them as my father might have received my mother's regard to his comfort, as kindnesses, things to thank me for, exertions of duty for which he was obliged to me. Oh, how his thanks galled me! It sometimes was very hard ado to keep my composure, to hide how my heart and my feelings were wounded, or to keep the old bitterness from rushing back. In these days I behaved better than he did; we had changed positions; it was he who was restless, and self-reproachful now: it was he who thought of being right, and adhering to his resolution. He had promised not to molest me, to accept what I yielded to him, to leave it all in my own hands—and he was keeping his word.

Immediately after our arrival at Cottiswoode I had written a very brief note to Flora

telling her I was here, and begging her to come, if Mamma would permit. I was very anxious for the verdict of Mrs Ennerdale. I did not know how I should be received by the country ladies, who, doubtless, had already sat in judgment on me—whether they had pronounced me without the pale, or if my return had covered the sin of my flight. It was nearly a week, and I had received no answer from Flora. I was somewhat nervous about it. I did not feel that it would be at all agreeable to be excommunicated by the little society which formed the world at Cottiswoode, and everything made me see more plainly how ill-advised and foolish I was to go away. Even Miss Saville patronized me grimly with a tacit disapprobation. It was not so much because I had done wrong, as because I had exposed my own affairs, and thrown off the privacy which belongs alike to family feuds and family happiness. I tried to persuade myself that I never had cared for society,—and that was very true; but rejecting society is a much easier thing than being

rejected by it,—and I did not like the latter alternative.

This morning, I was sitting by myself in the drawing-room. My husband spent a great deal of time out of doors, and was seldom with me except at table, and for a short time in the evening. Baby was out with Amy, his maid. The external circumstances did not differ much from those in which Flora Ennerdale found me last winter, on her first visit to Cottiswoode; but there was, in reality, a great change. I no longer sat in listless indolence, neither doing, nor caring to do anything. I was working busily at some little frocks for baby. The flowers upon my table were no longer without interest to me. I was not ignorant now of the management of the Cottiswoode School, and the wants of the old women at Cottisbourne. I had begun to use all the natural and innocent means of occupation that lay around me—and if I was not yet quite a Lady Bountiful, I had already made my peace with

the clamorous villagers, who did not quite smile upon me at my first return.

I was singing softly to myself as I sat at work—not because my heart was light—but Alice was not near me to talk to, and, truth to tell, I no longer wished for too much commerce with my own thoughts. The sound was a great deal more cheerful than the meaning was; but when I was thus occupied, I heard the sound of some arrival, and immediately, not Flora only, but Mrs Ennerdale, were ushered into the room.

I was so much surprised that it made me nervous—especially as I was at once enfolded in the wide, warm, odorous embrace of Mrs Ennerdale; here at least there was no lack of cordiality. I breathed more freely when I emerged from under the shadow of her great shawl and ample draperies; and Flora was so bright, so happy in what she supposed to be my happiness, that my heart melted under the sunny gleam of kindred and kindness. I was grateful to Mrs Ennerdale for acknowledging

my presence in her own person. I was glad to be relieved thus from one phase of anxiety; at least, thus far, I was not tabooed.

“And how well you are looking!” cried Mrs Ennerdale; “Flora told me you were quite pale and thin when she saw you. Ah’s there nothing like native air, my dear—you’ve got quite a bloom—you look better than ever I saw you look, though that is quite natural. Where is baby?—not asleep nor out of doors, I hope. Do you know you ought not to let me see him, for I shall begin to envy you immediately—I envy every woman I see with a baby in her arms. Ah, my dear, it’s the very happiest time of your life!”

I could very well understand how it should be so, and though I could not help sighing, I liked Mrs Ennerdale the better for what she said.

“May I run and look for him, cousin Hester?” cried Flora, eagerly, “I have been telling Mamma what a sweet baby he is, and I do so want to see him again; oh, I

see Alice in the garden ; there he is ! Let me run and bring him in myself to show Mamma."

"My dear, I wish you would tell Flora that she ought to be a little more sober now," said Mrs Ennerdale, appealing to me with motherly consequence, and a look half of sport, half of anxiety ; "she will mind you when she will not mind me, and she ought to be sober, and think of what's before her now ; do you not think so, Mrs Southcote ?"

"Oh Mamma !" cried Flora, springing out from the window ; we both looked after her light, bounding figure as she ran across the lawn towards Alice. "I know she told you all about it," said the good-humoured Mrs Ennerdale ; "don't you think she is too young to be married ? to fancy that such a child would even think of it ! but indeed I've taken great pains with Flora, and she is the eldest of the family, and knows a great deal about housekeeping, and I really believe will make a very good little wife ; though marriage is

a sad lottery, my dear," said the good lady sympathetically, shaking her head and looking into my face.

I turned away my head, and felt my cheeks burn; at first I was almost disposed to resent this hotly as an insult—but nothing would be further from the thoughts of the speaker than any unkindness to me. It was the first indication I had, of what "sympathy" was, in such a case as mine, and it stung me bitterly.

"My dear," continued Mrs Ennerdale, drawing close to me, laying her hand upon my shoulder, and lowering her tone; "I am glad that Flora is gone, just that I may say a word to you; I was grieved, of course—all your friends must have been—though I don't doubt you thought you had good reason; but, dear, it's far best to make up your mind to everything, and do your duty where Providence has placed you. We are relations, you know, in a way, and you've no mother to advise you; if you ever should have such

a plan again, my dear, will you come and speak to me about it? I'm no great wise woman, but I know what life is; will you ask my opinion, dear?"

"But I never can, nor will, have such a plan again," I answered rapidly.

"That's all the better, my love, all the better," said Mrs Ennerdale, "but if you should, I'll rely upon you coming to me. Hush, here's Flora; and is that baby? Now are you not proud of him? What a great boy! What a true Southcote! I can't tell whether he's like his papa or you; but I can see he's got the family face."

Mrs Ennerdale bustled out from the window to meet the advancing couple—Flora and little Harry—who, I think, without any vanity, would indeed have made as pretty a picture as could be imagined. I lingered behind a little to get over the pain and irritation of this first probing of my wound. It was kindly done, and I might have looked for it; but no one had ever ventured to speak to me in such

a plain and matter-of-fact way before, and I felt both shocked and wounded. My own act it was, too, which had exposed me to this—which had made it possible for any one to speak so to me! Well, well! there was baby and Flora, laughing, calling to me, inviting me. I smoothed my disturbed brow as well as I could and went out to them. I had no reason to be offended with Mrs Ennerdale, but I certainly was not grateful to her.

But her raptures were so real over my boy, her admiration so sincere and so ample, that I was gradually mollified. She “knew about babies,” too—that experience which a young mother prizes so highly; and knowing about them, still pronounced my little Harry almost unrivalled—“very much like what Gus was when he was a baby, Flo,” said Mrs Ennerdale, with a secret sigh, which I knew by instinctive sympathy was to the memory of some one sweeter than all others, who was only a name now, even to the fond remembrance of the mother. After that, I could remember no offence. I

began to tell her of little Harry's illness, to all the symptoms of which she listened with profound attention, now and then suggesting something, and wishing, with great fervour, that she had but been near at hand. "And if anything should happen again, my dear," said Mrs Ennerdale, taking hold of my hand in her earnestness, "be sure you send for me; send for me with as little hesitation as you send for the doctor. I've nursed all my own through all their little troubles—all but one—and I have experience. My dear, whatever hour it is, don't hesitate to send for me!"

I promised most heartily and cordially; I forgot she had ever said a word disagreeable to me; I only thought how kind she was, and how much interested in my boy.

Yes, Mrs Ennerdale had several motives for coming to see me—a lurking kindness for myself, fond regard for Flora's wishes, a half intent to lecture and warn, and establish herself as my prudent adviser—but, above all, the crowning inducement was, baby; nothing either whole

or half grown up had anything like the same charm as a baby had to Mrs Ennerdale ; she might have resisted all the other motives, but baby was irresistible ; and so she had come—and so she had fairly won over and vanquished me.

I made them stay till Edgar came in, and they had lunch with us ; but my husband, to my surprise, did not relax the state of his manners towards me in their presence. I could see that both mother and daughter were amazed at his elaborate politeness ; he thanked me for everything I did for him ; he feared he gave me trouble ; and Flora and Mrs Ennerdale glanced at us with troubled looks, as if to ask, “ Is there still something wrong ; are you at variance still ? ” My own heart sank within me ; I had scarcely been prepared for this ; I thought, for my honour and for his own, that he would have made an effort to be like himself to-day.

“ Flora ought not to be away from home ; she ought not, indeed, at such a time as this,” said Mrs Ennerdale, “ but she wishes very much to stay till to-morrow. Will you keep her, my

dear? not if it is to inconvenience you—but she says you would not let her come again when you were,—ah!—in the country—and that you owe her an invitation now. We have spoiled her; she is quite rude, asking for an invitation—but if you like, my dear, I shall leave her with you till to-morrow. She has a great deal to tell you, she says.”

“What, a great deal *more*, Flora?” I asked; “I will keep her very gladly, longer than to-morrow, if you will let me, and I should like so much to help if I could. Is there anything you can trust me with, Mrs Ennerdale.”?

“My dear, you have plenty to do with your baby,” said Mrs Ennerdale, conclusively; “What a beautiful present that was you gave her! far too valuable, indeed, but her papa says he has seen your mamma wear it, and she is so proud of being called like your mamma. Is that the miniature you told me of? May I see it? Well, indeed, Flora, though it is a great compliment to you, I do think there is a resemblance—ah, she was a pretty crea-

ture! but of course you cannot recollect her, my dear?"

I said, "No," briefly, and there was a momentary pause, which, however, Mrs Ennerdale soon interrupted; she was very full of kind counsels to me concerning my baby, and of motherly importance in her own person, full of care and bustle as she was, on the eve of the "first marriage in the family." After luncheon, Mrs Ennerdale went away, leaving strict injunctions with Flora to be ready to return on the next day—my husband returned to his own constant occupations, and I was left alone with my sweet young cousin.

Flora made no investigations, asked no questions, yet even she looked up wistfully into my eyes as she exclaimed, "How glad I am you are at home! oh, are you not pleased, cousin Hester, to have baby at home?"

"Yes, Flora, very glad," I said, though I could not help sighing. She, sweet simple heart, knew nothing of my troubles. She never could know how far astray I had gone,

nor what a very poor compromise, in real truth, was my position now.

“And you will come?” Flora said, blushing all over her pretty face. “It is to be in a month—you will be sure to come, cousin Hester? though I am afraid you will think it noisy and a great bustle, for there are to be a great many—six bridesmaids. Do you think it is wrong to be gay at such a time? but indeed I could not help it, cousin Hester.”

“And, indeed, I do not think it wrong, cousin Flora,” said I, smiling at her seriousness; “and I only wish I could do something to show how very right I think it to do honour to a bride. Is there nothing you would like yourself that Mamma is indifferent about? Not anything at all that I could do for you, Flora?”

By dint of close questioning it turned out that there were two or three things which Flora had set her heart upon, and which Mamma was not remarkably favourable to; and the result of our conference was, that I was seized with a strong

desire to drive to Cambridge immediately with my young guest, and make some certain purchases. There was time enough yet to do it, and Flora was in great delight at the proposal, which gave me also no small degree of pleasure. After the usual fears that it was troubling me, Flora ran up stairs very willingly to get ready, and I, with a little tremor, knocked softly at the door of the library. My husband was seated as usual at his table—busy, or seeming so. When I entered he looked up, as he always did now when I went to him, with a startled look of expectation. I told him we were going to Cambridge, but hoped to be back in time for dinner. It always confused and disturbed me, this look of his.

“And am I to go with you, Hester?” he said, rising with some alacrity.

“Oh, no,” I said, confused and hesitating; “I did not mean to trouble you. I—of course, if you pleased, we should be very glad; but I only wanted to tell you—I did not think ——.”

“Very well,” he said, sitting down, and

interrupting my tremulous explanation. "I thank you for letting me know. Perhaps Mrs Templeton had better delay dinner to give you full time. I hope you will have a pleasant drive. Ah, there is the carriage—you should lose no time, Hester."

Thus dismissed, I hastened away—always, alas—always bringing with me when I left him a sore heart. Would he have been pleased to go?—should I have asked him? How I tormented myself with these questions! If we had been living in full mutual love and confidence I should have said to him, gaily—"We do not want you; this is quite a confidential woman's expedition—a thing with which you have nothing to do;" but now I went away pondering whether I should not spoil our little piece of impromptu business, and make the drive and the afternoon alike miserable by returning once more, and entreating him to go.

When we came to the hall door—Flora so bright and smiling, I so careworn and disturbed—he was waiting to put us in the carriage;

and my heart rose again when he held my hand a moment, and asked if I was sufficiently wrapped up ; and it was impossible to resist the influence of this rapid motion, and of Flora's pleasant company. I recovered my spirits in spite of myself. We had a very quick drive to Cambridge ; a round of calls at the principal shops, to the great satisfaction and delight of Flora ; and then it suddenly occurred to me that I would like to see, if only for a moment, our old house.

But when we came to the door my heart failed me. I had never been there again since I left it after my father's death, and one glance at the familiar place was enough to fill my eyes with tears, and to bring back the pang of parting to my mind. It was now about a year since my father died. I had not mourned for him with the heavy, lasting, languid sorrow that wears out a mind at peace. I had mourned him with pangs of bitter grief, with brief agonies, more severe but less permanent—and looking again

at this retired and quiet dwelling-place so associated with him, and from which it was so impossible to believe him departed, I felt as if I had been stricken down at the threshold and could not enter. It looked something mysterious, awful, withdrawing thus in its perfect stillness—the past was dwelling in that deserted place.

While I sat hesitating, gazing at the closed door, I saw Mr Osborne's familiar cap and gown approaching. I knew it was Mr Osborne at the first glance, and, yearning for the sight of a familiar face, I looked out from the window, and almost beckoned to him. He came forward with a ceremonious bow, and greeted me very statelily—but my heart was touched, and in spite of this I began to tell him that I had intended to alight and dared not. He saw the tears in my eyes, and his manner, too, was softened. "No," he said, "you are quite right, you could not bear it. I, myself, find it hard enough, passing by this familiar door."

He paused a moment, looked at me



keenly, and then said, "Will you take me with you, Hester?—are you in haste?—I have an old engagement with Harry—Where are you going?—ah, then I shall join you in half an hour; but in the meantime don't stay here; close the window; I will tell them to drive on, and join you in half an hour."

When I found Mr Osborne sitting opposite to me as we set out again homeward, I cannot tell how strangely I felt. My cheeks were tingling still with the name he had used—Harry!—and I was overpowered with all the recollections which his presence brought to me. The last time we had been together in the same carriage was at my father's funeral—and all the recollections of that most eventful time—my betrothal, my marriage, my father's illness and death—came rushing back upon me in the sound of his voice. I had hard ado to preserve my composure outwardly—I was scarcely able to do more than introduce him to Flora, to whom he began

to talk with pleasure and surprise, as I thought, pleased with her for her name's sake, though, in the twilight, he' could scarcely see her sweet face—and then I sank back into my corner, and gave all my strength to subdue the tumult of memories and emotions which rose in my mind. That I should be taking him home to Cottiswoode—that he should still speak of my husband as Harry—that he should come to see my defeat and anxious struggle to do my duty—how strange it was!

I remember that night as people remember a dream—our rapid progress through the dark—the gleam of the carriage lamps—the sound of the horses' feet—the conversation going on between Mr Osborne and Flora, and the long sigh of the wind over the bare expanse of country. We went at a great rate, and reached home sooner than I expected. It looked so homelike—so bright—so full of welcome; the hall-door wide open; the warm light streaming out; and my

husband standing on the threshold waiting for us. Oh, if these were but real tokens, and not false presentments! It was bitter to see all this aspect of happiness, and to know how little happiness there was.

My husband greeted Mr Osborne with surprise and pleasure. Flora ran upstairs, and I went into the drawing-room with our new guest, though, in my heart, I longed to be with baby, from whom I never had been so long absent before. My husband came with us, though he and I scarcely said anything to each other. I could see how Mr Osborne's acute eye watched what terms we were on. Then Edgar left us to make some arrangements for our visitor's comfort, and my old friend turned his full attention upon me.

I had taken off my mantle, and he saw the miniature at my neck. In a kindly, fatherly fashion he caught the little chain with his finger and drew me nearer to him, and looked into my face. I could not meet

his eye—I drooped my head under his gaze, and, in spite of myself, the tears came.

“ Well, Hester,” he said gently, in his old kind, half-sarcastic tone, “ Now that you have experience of it, what do you think of life ?”

“ It is very hard,” said I, under my breath.

“ Ay, that is the first lesson we all learn,” he said ; “ have you not got beyond this alphabet—is it only hard, and nothing more ?”

I heard baby’s voice outside. Alice was looking for me. I ran from him, opened the door, took my beautiful boy out of the arms of Alice, brought him in, and held him out to Mr Osborne—his face brightened into the pleasantest smile I had ever seen upon it.

“ Ah, this is your better lesson, is it, young mother ?” he said laying his hand caressingly on my head, while he bent to look at my boy ; “ the life is something more than hard which yields such blossoms, Hester—is that what this famous argument of yours would say ? and this irresistible piece of logic is a boy, is he ?

God bless you, little man, and make you the happiest of your race !”

“ I must go away, Mr Osborne, baby wants me,” said I.

“ Yes, go away ; I am quite contented, Hester,” said Mr Osborne, once more patting my head ; “ go away, my dear child—you are going to cheat me once more into entire approval, I can see.”

I was pleased ; yet I went away with a heavy heart, under my first flush of gratification. I could not help remembering again and again what he had said—it was easy to make misery, but who should mend it when it was made.

Oh, my boy, my baby ! what a disturbed and troubled heart you laid your little head upon ! but its wild and painful beating never woke or startled *you*.

After dinner, when Flora and I were by ourselves in the drawing-room, we had our parcels in and examined them once more—such quantities of bright ribbons and pretty cotton frocks ;

Flora, though much delighted, was not quite confident that she had been right—she was afraid Mamma would think it was a great shame to let cousin Hester put herself to all this trouble, “and expense too,” said Flora, looking doubtfully up at me, “and all for my school-children at Ennerdale. I am so much afraid I was very wrong to tell you of it—and what will Mamma say?”

“Whom can we get to make them, Flora?” said I.

“That is just what I was thinking of,” said Flora, immediately diverted from her self-reproaches; “Mamma’s maid is a famous dressmaker, and I can cut out things very well myself, and they might have a holiday and meet in the schoolroom, and all of us work at them together; there is Mary and Laura and Lettie from the hall, and our own Annie and Edie, and myself; and oh, cousin Hester, would *you* come?”

“I should like to come” said I, “but

what shall I do with baby? and I am too old, Flora, for you and your bridesmaidens; I am more fit to stay beside Mamma."

Flora threw her arms round me caressingly, and a voice behind me said, "Does Hester say she is old? Do not believe her, Miss Ennerdale: she is a true girl at heart and nothing better—growing younger every day—though you never were very mature nor experienced, Hester—I must say that for you"—and Mr Osborne came forward very affectionately and stood by my side.

My husband entered the room after him; had they been talking, I wonder—talking of me? I could not tell, but I was learned now in all the changes of his face, and I saw that something had excited him. All this evening Mr Osborne continued to speak of me so, in a tone of fatherly affectionateness, praise and blame of which it was impossible to say that one was kinder than the other. He told little simple stories of my girlish days—things that I had forgotten long ago—

which made Flora laugh and clap her hands, but which embarrassed me dreadfully, and brought tears of real distress to my eyes. What was my husband thinking?—how did he receive all this? I scarcely dared lift my eyes to him. And then Mr Osborne touched upon the time of our wooing, and of our marriage! what could he mean?—this could not be mere inadvertence. I sat trembling, bending down my head over the work in my hand, my eyes full of tears, afraid to move lest I should betray myself—and even Flora grew grave and smiled no longer, while Mr Osborne went on unmoved. Oh, my husband, what was *he* thinking? I was glad to say faintly that I heard baby crying, and to escape from the room—it was more than I could bear.

Baby was not crying, but sleeping sweetly in his pretty cradle. I bent over him to get calmness and courage from his sleeping face. Alice was sitting by the fire, covering a soft ball with scraps of bright-coloured cloth ; just

one of those occupations which give the last touch of permanence and security to the appearance of home. It was for baby, of course—he had already one or two toys of the simplest baby kind, and we had been delighted to perceive the other day how he observed something thrown up into the air like a ball. Alice looked up when I came to her, and saw at once my disturbed face—she guessed what it was, though only imperfectly—and she drew my chair into the corner, and made me sit down and rest—“I thought it would be too much for you, Miss Hester,” said Alice, tenderly, “it brings back everything—I know it does—but it’s only the first, dear.”

I was content to wait beside her, and recover myself; though all the time my thoughts were busy downstairs, wondering what he might be saying now—and I am not sure that I was not more eager to return than I had been to make my escape. When I went back, I entered the room very

quietly—for I was considerably excited, and in my anxiety to appear calm, overdid my part. My husband was seated nearer Mr Osborne than he had been, and was bending down with his arms resting upon his knees, supporting his head in his hands, and gazing into the fire—while Mr Osborne talked after his lively fashion to Flora as if he were not aware of having any other auditor—he was speaking when I came in.

“I flatter myself, I am Hester’s oldest friend,” he said, “and we have quarrelled in our day. She had many disadvantages in her childhood. She wanted a mother’s hand ; but I always did justice to her noble qualities. Hester is—well, she is more my own child than any one else ever can be. I feel as if I had found her again—and she is—”

“I am here, Mr Osborne,” cried I—“oh don’t, don’t! you only humiliate me when you praise me!”

For there was *he* sitting silent while I was commended, hearing about my youth, and

perhaps smiling at it bitterly in his heart. It struck me down to the very dust to be commended before him; I would rather have been blamed, for then the unconscious comparison which I always supposed him making between what he knew and what he heard would have been less to my disadvantage. Mr Osborne did not know how his kind words and the affectionate tone which even now touched my heart, and would have made me very grateful under any other circumstances wounded and abased me now.

When I spoke, my husband raised his head, and threw a furtive glance at me—what could he be thinking? I shrank before his eye as if I had been practising some guilty art—as if I had conspired with Mr Osborne to insinuate to him that he had not sufficient regard for me.

“*I* praise you, Hester! did you ever hear me?” said Mr Osborne, smiling; “I was but telling Miss Ennerdale how you exhibited your baby to-day; and your young cousin, Hester,

is not to be moved out of the opinion that your boy is the *beau ideal* of boys ; my dear child," he said, suddenly, lowering his voice, and coming to take a seat beside me ; " she is very like your mother."

" Will you sing to Mr Osborne, Flora ?" said I. " I think she is very like my mother indeed, and she is very happy, and will be very happy—there is no cloud coming to her."

He shook his head but was silent, as Flora began to sing. My husband took a book, but I know he did not read a word of it. He sat listening as I did to some of those velvety drawing-room love-songs which Flora had, purely because they were " the fashion," and some others of a better kind which the girl's own better taste had chosen. Mr Osborne did not admire them as I did. He shook his head again slightly, and said, " A very good girl—a very good girl," as Flora's sweet young voice ran over verse after verse to please him. " That is not like your mother, Hester,"

he said; but it was Mr Osborne that was changed, it was not the music. He had been no connoisseur in the old days.

When Flora closed the piano it was nearly time to go to rest—and I was very glad to find it so. My husband and I were left last in the room when our visitors had retired—and when I went to bid him good night, he took my hand in both of his and put it to his forehead and his lips. I was very much agitated—I faltered out, “Have you anything to say to me?” I could find no other words—and he said, “No—no, nothing but good night.”

THE EIGHTH DAY.

MR OSBORNE was gone—Flora was gone—and we had relapsed into our former quietness. The neighbouring ladies called upon me, and I called upon them in return ; but I had no heart either to give or to accept invitations—for our personal relations to each other were unchanged ; and though there was peace, entire dead peace, never broken by an impatient word or a hasty exclamation, there was no comfort in this gloomy house of ours. We were so courteous to each other, so afraid to give trouble, so full of thanks for any little piece of service ! To my vehement temper, strife itself was even better than this, and many times I almost fled out of the house—hurried, at least, as much as I could *decorously* to refresh my fevered mind in the fresh air,

and ponder over our position again and again.

Why did he not make an end of this?—but then the question would come, why did not I make an end of it? I had come home to do him justice, but he had warned me long beforehand that justice would not satisfy him, and had promised solemnly to leave it all in my hands. Had I all the responsibility?—what could I say?—what could I do?—and it was not always easy to keep down a spark of the former bitterness, a momentary resentment against him who would not step in to assist me, but who left all the guilt and all the burden of this unnatural state upon me. For my own part, I persuaded myself that I had done everything I could do—I had made my submission—I had brought him justice;—what more could be done by me?

Every time he made his thanks to me, I was on the point of breaking forth in a passionate protest against being so addressed—but I know not what failing of the heart prevented me. I


never did it; I learned to thank him myself after the same fashion, to try if that would sting him into giving up this obnoxious practice. I could see it *did* sting him, but not so far as this; and we were still polite—oh, so dreadfully courteous, grateful, indebted to each other!

Upon this day I had burst out after my usual fashion, in desperation, able to bear no more. Had Mrs Ennerdale or any other prudent adviser been able to see into my heart, and to take me to task for it, I could have given no proper reason for my perturbation. My husband had not been unkind, but perfectly the reverse—he was considerate, careful, attentive in the highest degree; I had no *reasonable* cause to find fault with him—but—I could not be patient to-day. I had suffered a great deal, and permitted no sign of it to appear in my behaviour. I had tried to learn the true secret of wifely forbearance, mildness, gentleness; but I was of an impetuous character by nature, and had never been taught to rule or restrain myself. My endurance was worn out—it was

in my mind to make an appeal to him, to tell him he was unjust—unjust!—here was I using the term again, when I had wished so often that there was not such a word in the world.

I had my mantle on, and the hood drawn over my head. It was not unusual for me to wander along this quiet country lane in such a simple dress, for there were no passengers here, except the rectory people or villagers from Cottisbourne, and I was close by home. It was late in the afternoon, the first day of November, and the weather was dark and cloudy. My husband was in the library, where he always sat; baby was in his cosy nursery upstairs, in the careful hands of Alice. He, dear, little fellow, always wanted me, and I was never unhappy while with him—but darkness and discontent had settled on me now. I realized to myself vividly that gloomy picture of a household—two dull large rooms closely adjoining each other, the young husband shut up in one, the wife in another. Why was it;—he was the first to blame;—why did he fail to yield me

now what was due to a woman? Would it not have been generous to take the explanation on himself, and disperse this dreadful stifling mist which every day grew closer around us?—to say—“we have been wrong; let us forget it all, and begin our life again?” He ought to say it—it was my part to wait for him, not he for me; he owed me this, as the last and only reparation he could make for the first deceit which I had forgiven. So I reasoned to myself as I wandered along this solitary road; there was more resentment, more displeasure in my mind than there had been for many a day. It was unnatural, it was shocking, the state of things which now existed. I began to grow indignant at him for not doing what it so clearly seemed his part to do. At this moment I saw Miss Saville advancing very slowly and dully along the road. She was so active and brisk a person at all times, that I was surprised to see the heaviness of her look and face to-day. She came forward reluctantly, as if every step she took added to her burden. Her mind



was evidently oppressed and ill at ease, for she looked round her on every side, and started at trivial sounds as if in fear. When she saw me she suddenly stopped, and a red colour came to her face. She was not young, and had never been at all pretty—I cannot call this a flush, but only a painful burning red which came to her cheeks—shame, and distress, and fear. I did not want to embarrass and distress her—I knew how much good lay under her formality and her pretensions now.

“Do not let me disturb you,” I said eagerly; “do not mind me at all, pray, Miss Saville; I see you are engaged.”

She waited till I came up to her, looking at me all the time. “I was coming to seek you,” she said; “where were you going, Mrs Southcote; are you at leisure? I have something to say to you.”

“I was going nowhere,” I said. “I am quite at your service—what is it!”

She looked at me again for a moment; “I can’t tell you what it is—I don’t know—I want

you to come with me to the rectory; but my dear," she continued, her "sense of propriety" coming to her aid, even in the midst of her agitation, "had you not better go back and get your bonnet? it is not becoming to walk so far in such a dress."

"No one will see me," I said briefly; "but what am I to do at the rectory—can you not tell me here?"

"It is not I, Mrs Southcote," said Miss Saville, with suppressed agitation; "I told you once before that we had trouble in our family, and that there was one among us who gave great sorrow to William and me; but you did not mind my story, for you were like other young people, and thought no trouble so bad as your own. But my poor brother Richard is back again here, and he has not improved his ways, and he is always raving about you. He says he wants to see you. We won't let him go up to Cottiswoode, for when he sees Mr Southcote, I know he constantly seeks money from him, and we cannot bear that; so, to

pacify him, I promised to look for you to-day, and try to persuade you to come to the rectory with me. Now, my dear, will you do it? You would not speak to him before, and I could not blame you; but he speaks as if something lay upon his conscience—oh, Mrs Southcote, will you see him and hear what it is?”

“If you wish it, I will go,” said I; “I do not want to hear anything he has got to say myself; but if it will please you, Miss Saville—I know you must have thought me very heartless once—if it pleases you, I will go.”

She said, “thank you, my dear,” breathlessly, and hurried me on—though, even now, not without a lament for my bonnet. As we came near, I saw once more the face of the Rector peering out from the corner window. Miss Saville saw it too, and burst into a hurried involuntary recital of their troubles. “William is miserable!” she cried with excitement, “you don’t know what William is, all you people who look at the appearance, and not at the heart—he is the best brother—the kindest

friend!—and now, when he had come to the station he was entitled to, and was in the way of doing his duty and being respected as he deserves, here comes Richard to wring our hearts and expose us to disgrace!—If we had money to give him he would not stay long with us, but William would rather sacrifice everything in the world than refuse a kind home to his brother; and there he is taking care of him—and the Rector's study smelling of brandy and water, and bits of cigars upon his mantelshelf and his writing-table—and he as patient as an angel—oh, Mrs Southcote, it's very hard!”

As we entered at the trim gate, and went up through the orderly, neat garden, where not a weed was to be seen, I could understand this smaller aspect of Miss Saville's affliction, the ends of cigars, and the smell of brandy and water, as well as her greater and sorer sorrow over the fallen brother, who still was dear to her—but the idea of an interview with him was not more agreeable on this account. I

waited while she hurriedly dried her eyes, and went in with her very reluctantly. What could this man want with me? and all my old abhorrence of him returned upon me as I prepared for this unpleasant meeting. He was the first messenger of misfortune to our house, and I had never tried to surmount my first disgust and aversion to him.

The Rev. Mr Saville's trim, snug study, was indeed sadly desecrated. He himself, the good Rector, was coughing in the atmosphere of smoke which hovered round the fire where Saville sat, with his legs upon a chair, in insolent ease and luxury. There was no brandy and water visible, but the heated look in the man's face, and the close, disagreeable air of the room, were quite enough to justify what his sister said. I suppose it was in the haste of her agitation that she ushered me immediately into the room, where we did not seem to be expected, and where I scarcely could breathe.

"You should not have brought Mrs Southcote here, Martha," said the Rector, who

was no less stiff and formal than of old, though a painful embarrassment mingled with his elaborate courtesies; "this is not a fit place for a lady—we will join you in the drawing-room, Martha."

"Any place will do to tell good news in," said Saville, withdrawing his feet from the chair, and sitting erect. "Give the lady a seat, Martha, and leave us; glad to see you, Mrs Southcote—glad to have an opportunity of making my statement to you—had you heard it sooner it might have saved you trouble. Now, good people, why are you waiting? This piece of news does not concern you. William, take Martha away."

"Oh, don't leave me, Miss Saville," I said, retreating a little, and grasping her hand.

"What, afraid!" said the man, with a sneer; "you had more spirit when I saw you first, young lady; but as this that I have to say to you," he continued, gravely, "is of the greatest importance to your family, I leave it with yourself to judge whether i

would not be best to keep it for your own ears alone."


What could it be? I looked earnestly at him, and he at me. I was no coward, and here, where I had only dislike, and no other feeling which could betray me, I was brave enough after the first moment. I turned to the Rector and Miss Saville, who stood behind, half-frightened, half-displeased, and full of anxious curiosity. "Pray leave us, as he says," said I. "If it is anything worth your hearing, I will tell you what it is—but in the meantime he will not speak till you are gone."

The Rector made a bow to me, and withdrew slowly, much agitated, and very nervous, as I could see. Miss Saville went more reluctantly. "It was a very strange thing to turn the Rector out of his own study for a secret conference," she muttered as she went away. Saville laughed—"Though it will be worth their hearing, I'll warrant you do not tell them a word of it," he said, with the same coarse insinuation of something wrong

or untruthful, which I remembered so well on that first day when he came to Cottiswoode. "They are very curious, the fools!—as if they had anything to do with it. Now, Mrs Southcote of Cottiswoode, are you ready to hear me?"

I had drawn my chair away to the window out of reach of his smoky atmosphere and his immediate presence—an artifice at which he laughed again—I bowed slightly in assent; and now he rose, and coming towards me, stood leaning upon the corner of the recess which enclosed the window, looking down into my face.

"I hear that my friend Edgar and you don't get on together," said the man, with rude familiarity; "pity when such things arise in families—and generally very bad policy too—but, however, that can't be helped in the present case. He's disposed to be master, I suppose, and, after all, though you've humbled your pride to marry him, you've not got Cottiswoode."




"If you wish only to insult me," I said, starting from my chair, "not even for your good brother and sister's sake can I endure this impertinence. How do you dare to speak in such a tone to me?"

"I dare worse things than facing a pretty young lady," said Saville, with his insolent laugh, "but that is not the question, and you shall have none of my impertinence if you like it so little; though I thought you were too honest to sham a reason for this marriage of yours; however, as I have said, that is not the question. As for your family *happiness*, every clown in the district knows what that is, as, of course, you are aware. And if *I* had been you I'd have stayed away, and not made a fool of myself by coming back."

I said nothing. I felt my face burn, and there was an impulse of fury in my heart—fury, blind wild rage, murderous passion. I could have struck him down where he stood before me, with his odious sneer upon his face—

but I did not move. I compressed my lip and clasped my hands together, till the pressure was painful, but I made no other indication of how I felt the insult of his words. Yes, this was justice—I acknowledged it—my fitting punishment.

“Well, things being so,” continued Saville, drawing a chair towards him and sitting down upon it, after he had gazed at me maliciously to see the effect of his words, and had been disappointed—“I think you are a very fit client for me; Edgar has done me more than one shabby trick—I give him up; I do as I am done by—that’s my principle—and a very honest one, I maintain; so if you choose to make it worth my while, I’ll put you in possession of all I know, and give you my zealous assistance to recover your rights. These fools here,” he said, waving his hand contemptuously to indicate his brother and his sister, “will tell you perhaps what a dissipated fellow I am. What can a man do in this wretched hole of a place? Give me excite-



ment, and I don't care a straw how its come by; I owe Edgar Southcote a hard hit yet—and hang me, but he shall have it, one way or another.”

This speech awoke me at once out of anger, mortification, every personal feeling—I no longer feared or hated him—I was roused to a cool and keen observation, a self-possession and firmness which I did not know I possessed. I felt the stirring of strength and spirit in me like a new life. I was on the verge of a dangerous secret—a conspiracy—a plot against Edgar! The fool! the fool! to betray his evil counsels to Edgar's wife. My heart beat quicker, my courage rose, I was like one inspired; a little caution, a little prudence, and I might save my husband—how warmly the blood came to my heart!

I looked at him eagerly; I did not care to suppress the sparkle of excitement in my eyes; I knew his evil imagination would interpret it very differently from the truth; his evil intent, and my own conscious purpose

gave me perfect confidence in addressing him—for he had no perception of truth, or love, or honour, and never would suspect what lay beneath my eager willingness to hear him now.

“There is some secret then,” said I—“what is it? what are the rights that you will help me to regain? Such a startling speech makes me anxious of course—what do you mean?”

“I suppose,” said Saville, very slowly, to pique my curiosity, “that before you can be expected to put any dependence in me, I must tell you my story—first let me collect my evidences;” and he took a pocket-book from his pocket, and collected several papers out of it, with great care and deliberation, now and then glancing at me under his eyebrows to see if I was impatient. I was not impatient—I watched him keenly—coolly—not a movement or a glance escaped my notice; I was Edgar’s advocate, and I was watching his enemy.

“Mr Brian Southcote,” said Saville, going

on slowly, and now and then looking up at me as he sorted his papers, "was an extremely benevolent person—so much so that ill-natured people said he had no will of his own, and that he did not care how wrong or how foolish anything was, so long as it was generous; perhaps you object to such plain speaking when your respectable relative is the subject," he said, stopping short with a low bow.

"Pray, go on, go on!" said I impatiently.

I suppose he thought now that he had tantalized me sufficiently, for he proceeded at a less deliberate pace.

"It is said that his younger brother, Mr Howard, had married the lady to whom they were both attached, and lived in his father's house, in possession of all the ordinary privileges of an heir, while the elder brother was self-banished in Jamaica, on pretence of looking after an estate, which he knew nothing about, and had not activity enough to have done anything for, even if he had been informed. Now, Mrs Southcote,

under these circumstances, your uncle, being still a young man, of course married the first woman who made herself agreeable to him—and this woman happened to be my cousin, the widow of a young naval officer—a young penniless widow with one boy.”

I started involuntarily—I could see already where the serpent was winding — was this the secret ?

“With one boy,” he continued significantly, “called Harry Southern—you see there is not much difference even in the name; this child, as I will show you by a paper executed by your uncle some time before his marriage, he had already chosen for his heir, directing that he should take his name, and, after his death, be called Harry Southcote. It is not to be supposed that, after Mr Southcote married Mrs Southern, his partiality for the boy should diminish; and this boy I have every reason to suppose is your husband, whom, by politeness, I will still call Edgar Southcote of Cottiswoode.”

I was stunned for the moment—the story looked reasonable, true—it was no exaggerated malicious lie coined on the spot. I looked up with dismay into the hard exultation of this man's face—but when I caught his cunning evil eye, my heart revived.

“Had you always reason to suppose this?” I said, keeping my eyes fixed upon him.

For a moment, only a moment, his confident glance fell. “Of course not—of course not,” he said, with a little bustle and swagger, which I could see was to conceal some embarrassment. “When *I* took steps in the matter, you may be sure I thought I had got hold of the right person; it is only lately that I have found my error out.”


“And how did you find it out?” I asked perseveringly.

“Upon my word, young lady, you try a man's patience,” cried my respectable adviser—“I *did* find it out—what concern have you with the how? If you are

disposed to take advantage of my information, it is at your service—but I will not be badgered by the person for whose sole benefit I have taken so much trouble. Will that convince you—look?”

He almost threw at me one of the papers in his hand—I lifted it up mechanically—I was so sure what it would say from his description, that I almost fancied I had read it before. It was a will, bequeathing all the personal property of the writer to Harry Southern, the son of the late George Southern, Lieutenant R.N., on condition of his assuming the name of Southcote; I read it over twice, and it struck me strangely enough, that after the first words of the bequest there was a parenthesis “(if he survives me),” which was repeated every time the name of Harry Southern occurred. I held it out—holding it fast, however—to Saville, and asked him what it meant.

“A mere point of law,” he answered




indifferently, "what could it be else? Ladies, I know, never understand business; but these trifling matters have nothing to do with the main question—you see very clearly who this child was—there can be no mistake about that."

"I see nothing to identify him with Edgar Southcote," I said.

"You are sceptical," said Saville—"let me see if I can convince you; here are some papers which throw light upon the matter."

These papers were letters—three of them—bearing dates very near to each other—all referring in terms of tender fondness to some little Harry; the first was signed "Maria Southern," the other two "Maria Southcote," but little Harry had quite as much part in the former as in the latter, and these documents were evidently true. I was greatly disturbed;—could it be so? could it be so? Was my husband only the heir, and not the son of Brian Southcote? The evidence was very startling to my unused and




ignorant eyes. I kept the papers closely in my hand, resolved not to give them up again. I did not know what arguments to use to myself to cast off this fear ;—at last I cried, abruptly—“ If this was the case he could not be like the Southcotes—he would be like your family—but he is like Edgar the Scholar ; I found out the resemblance at once.”

“ It is easy to find resemblances when your mind is turned to it,” said Saville. “ Is he as like now ?—and suppose he had been introduced to you as Harry Southern, would you ever have cared to examine who he was like ?”

Harry Southern ! the idea was intolerable. I started from my seat—I could not bear it any longer. “ I shall think over this, and let you know what I will do,” I said, hurriedly. “ It is very startling news—I must have some time to accustom myself to it, and then I shall be able to tell you what I can do.”

“ Be so good as to return me my papers, then,” said Saville ; “ by all means think it



over—it is no joke—you had best be prudent ; but, in the meantime, let me have my papers—they are my property, not your's."

"I will not give them back—they concern me too nearly," said I. "Stay—if you try to take them I shall call your brother. I will not endure your touch, sir;—stand back—these letters are Miss Saville's—I will undertake that no harm shall happen to them, that you shall come to no loss—but I will not give them back."

I did not move, but stood within the reach of his arm, fixing my eyes full upon him as I spoke. He could not bear an honest gaze ; he stared at me with impotent fury, but he dared not resist me. I saw his terror at the thought of summoning his brother, and how he lowered his voice and drew back his hand at the very mention of the Rector's name.

"You are a bold young lady—but I like your spirit," he said, with a scowl which belied his words. "Well, I consent that you shall keep the papers—that is to say, I trust them to

your honour ;—shall I have your decision to-morrow ?”

“ I cannot tell—I must have time,” I said, growing nervous at last, and drawing nearer the door ; “ have you ever mentioned this ?—does Mr Southcote know ?”

“ You will not tell *him* ?” cried Saville fiercely, starting and following me, “ you will not be so foolish as to show *him* your hand before the play begins ? I knew women were fools in business, but I did not expect this from you—from you, Mrs Southcote ! you do not mean to pretend you are so loving and true a wife. No, I am not a likely person to have mentioned it—I know my man too well ; small evidence I should have had if it had ever come to his knowledge—I will not permit you to risk my papers in Edgar South—in Harry Southern’s hands.”

As he advanced upon me, I retreated—as he grew vehement, I threw the door open and walked hastily away—he followed me with great strides, yet restrained by a strange

cowardice which I knew how to take advantage of—and when his sister suddenly appeared from the next room, he stopped short, and threw a look of cowardly threatening, and yet entreaty, upon me. “Do not let him follow me,” I whispered to her—but I knew they would take care of that—and though I managed to leave the house at a decorous pace, whenever I got into the lane I began to run. I had always been swiftfooted from a child—now I flew along the solitary lane, scarcely feeling that I touched the ground, holding the papers close under my mantle. When I came to Cottiswoode, flushed, and eager, and breathless, I did not pause even to throw back my hood, but hastened to the library. There was no one there—I hurried out disappointed, and asked for Mr Southcote. He had gone out some time ago I was told, and had left a message for me with Alice. I ran upstairs—the message was that he was suddenly called to Cambridge, and could not expect to return till late at night—and he hoped I would not think of waiting

up for him—it was sure to be very late when he came home.

I cannot tell, indeed, whether I was most relieved or disappointed to hear this; though I think the latter—yet now, at least, I would have time to think over this tale, to try if it was a fable, a monstrous invention, or if it could be true. It was late, and I got little leisure till baby was asleep, but when he was laid down to his rest, and Alice left the room, I sat down by her little table and unfolded my papers. My heart beat loud while I read them over—my fears sickened me. I had no longer the presence of Saville before me, strengthening me in disbelief and opposition. Alas, poor perverse fool! this was a fit conclusion to all the misery I had made; this long year of troubles ever since my marriage I had been bitterly and cruelly resenting the discovery that my husband was Edgar Southcote—now how gladly would I have hailed, how wildly rejoiced in, an assurance that he had indeed a title to that name. The more I examined, the more

I pondered, the more my fears grew upon me. If Edgar was an unwitting, involuntary impostor—the thought was terrible—and still more terrible it was to think that Cottiswoode would then be *mine*. I thought I could have borne to leave a wrongful inheritance with him, had it been pure loss to both of us; but that I should be “righted” by his downfall—Ah, that was a justice I had not dreamed of! I could not rest—I wanted to do something immediately to settle this question; but that it was so late, I think I would have followed him to Cambridge—but that was not to be thought of now; so I wandered up and down from the library to my own room, always returning to the letters—and tried to conceal from myself how the hours went on, and how the household was going to rest. I still hoped that I might have gone to him at once on his return, and it was only when Alice, with a sleepy face, came calling me to baby, that I yielded at last, and went to bed, but not to sleep. Through all the dreary midnight

hours after that I lay still and listened, hearing every sound, and supposing a hundred times over that I heard him return. Now and then I started up after a few moments' sleep, and went to the door to look out and listen—but there was still the dull light burning in the hall, the silence in the house, the drowsy stir of the man who waited for his master below—then my restlessness made baby restless also, and I had to occupy myself with him, and subdue my anxiety for his sake. It was a dreary night; but I had nothing for it but to submit—lying still, sleeping in snatches, dreaming, thinking—thoughts that ran into dreams, and longing, as only watchers long, for the morning light.

THE NINTH DAY.

I WAS astir by dawn ; but before even Alice came to me I was aware that my husband had not returned. The sleepy light in the hall still burned through the early morning darkness, and the watcher still stirred the fire, which had not gone out all night. When I made sure of this I hastened down to relieve the man from his uncomfortable vigil, and on my way met Mrs Templeton, newly roused, who began immediately to assure me that "something very particular must have detained Master—it was a thing he had never done before all his life,—but she hoped I would not be uneasy, for he'd be sure not to stay from home an hour longer than he could help." I do not know how it was, but

this speech of the housekeeper's roused me into unreasonable anger. I was offended that any one should suppose my husband's conduct wanted defence to me; or worse still, that any one should presume to know him better than I did. I answered briefly that I was aware Mr Southcote had business to detain him, and hastened to my room to complete my dress. Almost unconsciously to myself, I put on a dark, warm travelling dress; the morning was brisk, frosty, and cheerful, and for the moment I was roused with the stimulus of having something to do. Somehow, even his absence and the long watch of the night did not dismay me—all at once it occurred to me, not how miserable, but how *foolish* our discords were; the ordinary view—the common sense of the matter flashed upon me with a sudden light. I blushed for myself, yet I was roused; half-a-dozen frank words on either side, I suddenly thought, would set us right at once. I moved about my room with a quickened step, a

sentiment of freedom ; Saville's papers, my own fears, all the dismay and anxiety of the night, united, I cannot tell how, to give an impulse of hearty and courageous resistance to my mind. There was something to do : I forgot my own guilt in the matter, and all the deeper feelings which were concerned. I thought of it all with impatience, as I have sometimes thought of the entanglements of a novel, which a spark of good sense would dispel in a moment. I forgot—though I was about the last person in the world to whom such a forgetfulness should have been possible—that good sense could not restore love, nor heal the bitterness of wounded affection. I determined for my own part not to lose a moment, not even to think it over, but to go direct to my husband at once, and say those same half-dozen sensible, frank, good-humoured words which should put an end to it all ; strange enough, my mind never misgave me as to the result.

I breakfasted in tolerably good spirits. I

made no account of the anxious looks of Alice; I was occupied with thinking of everything we could do, of the world of possibilities which lay before us, if we were but right with one another; how I could have lulled myself into ease so long, I cannot tell. I awoke out of it all with a start and cry when I heard the great clock strike twelve, and looking out—out of my lonely chamber window, out of my new dreams—saw the broad country lying under the broad, full, truthful sunshine; the morning mists dispersed and broken, and the day come to its noon.

Noon! my bright figments perished in a moment: he had not come home, he had not written nor sent any message; had he forsaken me, as I forsook him?

I got up from my seat at once, feeling nevertheless as if some one had stunned me by a sudden blow. Though Alice was in the room, I did not make her my messenger, as it was my custom to do, but rang the bell myself, ordered the carriage instantly, and

put on my bonnet. Alice came to help me without saying anything; my fears caught double confirmation from her silence. Something must have happened! she never asked where I was going, nor if she should accompany me, yet helped me to get ready as if I had told her all my thoughts.

“Where did he say he was to go?” I asked under my breath.

She told me; he had gone to a lawyer's in Cambridge, about some justice business—nothing that could detain him; I said nothing more, except to bid her be careful of baby, whom I had never before left so long as I most likely should leave him now. Then I hastened away. The winter noon was bright, the road crisp and white with frost, the air exhilarating and joyous. I leaned forward at the carriage window, looking out eagerly, if perhaps I might meet him returning; but the only person I saw was Saville, his enemy, pacing up and down the lane between the rectory and Cottiswoode, waiting, as I sup-

posed, to see me. The sight of this man brought my emotion to a climax. Any one who knows what anxiety is, will readily know that I had already leaped the depths of a dozen calamities—accident, illness, death itself—which might have happened to my husband,—and when it occurred to me now, that I might be going to his sick-bed or his death-bed, with these papers, which pretended to prove that he was not what he seemed, folded into my hand, I scarcely could bear the intolerable thought. I could not venture to anticipate how he would receive me if downfall came to him. I had deprived myself of all that generous joy of helping and lightening which might have given a certain pleasure to a good wife even in her husband's misfortune. I!—I dared not be generous to Edgar—dared not appear to come closer to him in his humiliation, if humiliation there was. I went on blindly in a kind of agony, scarcely venturing to think how I should speak, or what I should do. If anything had happened to Edgar

—any of those physical misfortunes which people speak of, as calling forth the disinterested and unselfish devotion of women, what could I do, who, all these weary months, had been resenting so bitterly his disinterested affection for me? And if Saville was right—if I, and not Edgar, was the true heir after all, how would it become me to rejoice, as any other wife could have done, in the certainty that all that was mine was his as well. In a moment our positions were changed. I thought of my husband—Edgar—Harry! as a poor man, having no title to anything save through his wife. I thought of him solitary and in suffering, able to make no exertion for himself, depending for all care and tenderness upon me. Heaven help me! this was the recompense I had laboured to secure for myself; our positions were changed; and how could I dare to offer to him the same love and benefits which I had rejected so bitterly when he offered them to me?

Yet we still went on at full speed to

Cambridge. When we came to our destination I alighted breathlessly, half expecting to encounter him at once, and without the faintest notion of what I was to say, or how to account for my errand. But he was not there—he had left this house, and, indeed, had left the town, early in the previous evening. I turned away from the door, sick to the heart. I asked no more questions. I would not betray my ignorance of his movements to strangers. He had left Cambridge to go home, but he had not come—had he left me?—had something happened to him?—what could I do?

And there stood Joseph at the carriage door asking where we were to go next. How could I tell? When I recollected myself, I bade him go to our old house, my father's house, and to drive slowly. I do not know why I wished to go slowly—perhaps with some unreasonable idea of meeting Edgar on the way.

When I reached the house this time, I alighted

and went in ; for the first time since my father's death. That strange old, dreary, silent house where dwelt the past—what had I to do there ? I went wandering about the rooms, up and down, in a kind of stupor, looking at everything with dull curiosity,—noticing the decay of the furniture, and some spots of damp on the walls, as if I had nothing more important on my mind. I cannot account for the strange pause I made in my agony of anxiety, fear, and bewilderment. I did not know what to do—I could not even think—there seemed a physical necessity for standing still somewhere, and recovering the power of myself.

I was in the library, looking round, seeing everything, yet only half aware where I was—when I started almost with superstitious terror to hear in the passage behind a well-known alert footstep, and the rustle of Mr Osborne's gown. He had seen the carriage at the door as he passed—for he lived so near that he could not go anywhere without passing

this way—and came to me in haste when he heard I was here. He came up anxiously, took my hand, and asked me what was the matter? I looked ill, I suppose.

And my heart yearned to have somebody to trust to—the sound of his voice restored me to myself. “I am in great trouble,” I said; “have you seen Edgar, Mr Osborne?—is he here?”

“Here!” it would indeed have been a strange place to find him.

“I do not mean in this house,” said I, with a little impatience; “is he in Cambridge? have you seen him?—I want to know where he is.”

“It is a strange question, Hester, yet I am glad to hear you ask it,” said Mr Osborne; “I presume, now, you are both coming to your right mind.”

“No—soon I shall not care for anything, right or wrong,” said I. “Edgar—he is a man—he should have known better—he has gone away.”

Then immediately I contradicted myself in my heart—he could not have gone away!—and yet—and yet!“Where is he?” I cried. “I have to speak to him—I have a great deal to say. Mr Osborne!—he had better not do what I did—he is not a fool like me—he was not brought up like me, among ghosts in this house—he ought to know better than me!”

Mr Osborne took my hand again, made me sit down, and tried to soothe me. Then I told him of Edgar’s absence—it was only one night—it was no such great matter—he smiled at my terror; but, at the same time, he bade me wait for him here, and went out to make inquiries. I remained for some time alone in the house—alone, with recollections of my father—of myself—of Harry—of all those young thoughts without wisdom, hopes without fear! I started up with renewed impatience. I could not, would not, suffer this unnatural folly to continue.

Ah, it was very well to say that! but what could I do?

When Mr Osborne came back, he looked a little grave. I penetrated his thoughts in a moment;—he thought some accident had befallen Edgar. He advised me to go home immediately and see if there was any word— if I did not hear before to-morrow, he would come out and advise with me, he said. So I went away again, alarmed, unsatisfied— reluctant that Mr Osborne should come, yet clinging to the idea, and full of the dreariest anxiety to know what news there might be at home. As I drove along in the twilight of the sharp winter night, I tried to settle upon what I should do.—Saville! If Edgar had left me, what could I do with this man? for I made up my mind to destroy the papers, and that my husband should never know of the doubt thrown upon him, if he had really gone away.

We were very near Cottisbourne on the

Cambridge side, driving rapidly, and it was now quite dark. The first sharp sparkles of light from the village windows were just becoming visible along the dreary length of road, and a few cold stars had come into the sky; my heart was beating fast enough already, quickening with every step we advanced on the road home, when some one shouted to us to stop; we did stop after a moment's confused parley, in which I could only distinguish that it was the Rector's name which induced the coachman to draw up. Mr Saville! it was his office to communicate calamities—to tell widows and orphans when a sudden stroke made them desolate—a sudden horror overpowered me—I leaned out of the window speechless, gazing into the darkness, and when I saw the light of the carriage lamps falling upon the Rector's troubled face, I waved my hand to him imperiously, almost fierce in my terror. "Tell me!" I cried; "I can bear it. I can bear the very worst. Tell me!" He drew near with a fluttered, agitated air, while I tried to open

the carriage door. With a sudden pang of joy and relief I saw that he did not understand me—that he had no *worst* to tell; but was holding back by the arm the other Saville, the enemy of our house.

“Here! *I* have something to tell you,” cried this man, struggling forward; “do you call this keeping your word, young lady? what do you mean by keeping my papers, and then running away?”

“Mr Saville,” I said, hastily appealing to the Rector, “I have nothing to say to him, yet. The papers are not his, but Miss Saville’s—when I have anything to say to him I will come to the rectory; just now I am very anxious to get home; oh, I beg of you, bid them drive home!”

“Don’t do anything of the sort, William,” said Saville; “stop, you fellow! So your precious husband’s run away,—I thought as much. Stop, do you hear! I’ve something to say to the lady. Why, Mrs Southcote, have you forgotten the appointment you made with me to-day?”

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in an agony of self-humiliation. It was all my own doing—he had gone away.

Just then Mrs Templeton made her appearance in considerable state, holding a letter. No doubt she as well as myself concluded what it was—a leave-taking—a final explanation—such a wretched letter as I had once left for him. “This came immediately you were gone, ma’am,” said Mrs Templeton, who looked as if she had been crying. “It ought to have come last night—but I gave the fellow such a talking to as he won’t forget yet awhile. Please to remember, ma’am, it wasn’t master’s fault.”

I took no notice of this—my whole mind was on the letter. I hastened in with it, without a word, and closed upon myself the door of the library. With trembling hands I tore it open—after that I think I must have fallen down on my knees in the extreme thankfulness which, finding no words, tried to say by attitude and outward expression what it could not

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and did not understand me. No ; I was far too unreasonable for any one to understand. I was in wild, high spirits now—singing to myself as I ran up stairs for baby. I said to myself—Life was coming—life was beginning—and that our old misery should not go on longer—not for a day !

And then the evening stole on by gentle touches—growing late before I knew. I went myself to see everything prepared—I watched the fires, which would not keep at the climax point of brightness, but constantly faded and had to be renewed again. I exhausted myself in assiduous attention to all the lesser comforts which might refresh a traveller on this wintry night. I went out to the avenue to see what a cheerful glow the windows of the library threw out into the darkness ; and within, it was pleasant to see how the whole house warmed and brightened under my unusual energy. The servants contemplated all this with evident surprise and bewilderment. From Joseph, who came to tell me that he had seen Saville safely

housed in the rectory, though with great trouble to the Rector, who scarcely could keep his brother from following me to Cottiswoode—and Mrs Templeton, whose manner towards me all the day had been very stately and disapproving—up to Alice, who never asked a question, but looked on, a most anxious spectator, only able to veil her interest by entire silence—everyone watched me and wondered. I knew as if by intuition how these lookers-on waited for the crisis of the story which had progressed before their eyes so long. Yes, my pride had need to have been humbled—it was I that had made of our household life a drama of passion and misery for the amusement of this humble audience—and I had my reward.

The evening grew late, but still no one came—I could not help growing very anxious once more;—then, stirred into excitement by the sound of some arrival, I was bitterly disappointed to see only Miss Saville, coming, as anxious as me, though after a different fashion, to find out if she could what the subject

was which had been discussed between her brother and myself. I was grieved for her distress, but I could not answer her—my own trouble was full occupation for me—and I said only, "To-morrow, to-morrow!"—that to-morrow which, one way or other, would be another era—a new time.

All this day I had avoided even looking at the papers which were Saville's evidence against Edgar. I kept them safe as I might have kept a loaded pistol, afraid of meddling with them. But after Miss Saville left me, I did what I could to compose myself, and endeavoured to examine them again. When I read them I grew faint with the terror of ignorance. I knew nothing about laws of evidence; and worse than that, I knew nothing of my husband's early history, and could not tell whether there might not be some other explanation of these letters. One thing in them struck me with a gleam of hope; there was a strange scarcely explainable shade of difference between the first letter and the other two. I could

not define it; but the impression left on my mind was, that the little Harry of the former paper was a child a few years old, while the expressions in the other letters were such as I myself used when speaking of *my* little Harry, and seemed to point so clearly to a baby that I was quite puzzled and disconcerted. It was a woman's discovery—I do not suppose any man would have observed it; but I did not at all know what to do with it, after I had found it out.

I put them away again—I waited, waited, far into the night; I would not be persuaded that it was near midnight, nor even permit the servants to go to rest. I kept the whole household up, the whole house alight and glowing. If he had been years instead of hours away, I could not have made a greater preparation for him. At length, very late, or rather very early, in the deep, cold gloom of the winter morning, about two o'clock, I heard horses' hoofs ringing down the avenue. I heard the sound before any one else did. I was at

the door waiting when they came up—*they!* for I saw with a momentary impulse of passionate anger and resentment that my husband was not alone.

The person with him was a grave, plain, middle-aged man, whom I had never seen before. Edgar sprang from his horse and came to me quickly—came with an exclamation of surprise, a look half of pain, half of pleasure; but began immediately to apologize and to thank me for waiting till he came—thanks! I hastened in, I almost ran from him to restrain myself; it seemed an insult, after all I had been thinking, all I had been suffering, to meet my new-born humbleness with those thanks, which always wounded me to the heart.

And then he brought in his companion to the bright room where I had been trimming the fire, and spreading the table for *him*, meaning to open all my mind and thoughts, to confess my sins against him, to make of this once cold abiding-place a genial household

hearth—he brought in here the stranger whom I had never seen before. The new comer took the very chair I had placed for Edgar, and spread out his hands over the cheerful fire. I am afraid to say how I felt towards him, and how his evident comfort and commonplace satisfaction excited me. They sat down together to the table—they began to talk of their business, which I knew nothing of. *I* was rather an unexpected embarrassment to my husband—he had no need then of *me*.

So I withdrew to my room, sick at heart—mortified, disappointed, wounded—feeling all my efforts thrown away. I could have borne it better, I think, but for the comfortable aspect of that stranger seated in my husband's chair. I think I could have done him an injury with satisfaction and pleasure. I felt a ludicrous grudge against him mingle with my serious trouble. And this was how this strange day of trial, hope, and resolution came to an end.

THE TENTH DAY.

I HAD been asleep—this was a privilege which seemed to belong to my perfect health and vigour of frame—for even in the midst of my troubles I could sleep. I woke up suddenly in the grey and feeble daylight of the winter morning to remember, in a moment, everything that had occurred last night. My own great vexation and disappointment were far enough off now to bear a calmer contemplation, and I started up suddenly inspired with the growing purpose in my heart. I could not see how it was to be done, nor what my first step should be, but I felt, as if by an inspiration, that somehow, however hard it was, the wall of division between us must be broken down to-day.

I hastened my simple morning toilette, and went immediately down stairs. Breakfast was on the table—breakfast! how strange, in the midst of agitation and excitement like mine, seemed these common necessities of life. And there was the same chair standing in the same position as I had placed it for Edgar last night. Patience! but the recollection of the stranger in the house came over me like a cold shadow—what if he should come to interrupt us again?

I had Saville's papers in my hand, and was putting them away in a drawer of the old carved cabinet which I had brought back to Cottiswoode from Cambridge, when I heard the door open and some one come in. Some one! I began to tremble so much that I scarcely could turn my head—but I knew it was my husband—that he was alone—and that the crisis had come. He came up to me at once, but with no apparent agitation to counterbalance mine. Scarcely knowing what I did, I took the letters again from the

drawer and stood waiting for him. Yes, he was a little excited—with curiosity at least, if nothing more—he looked keenly at me and at the papers which trembled in my hand—and I waited helplessly, unable to say a word, my heart fluttering to my lips. He could not help but see the extreme agitation which overpowered me.

“Hester,” he said slowly, his own voice faltering a little, “I heard you were seeking me yesterday in Cambridge.”

“Yes”—

“Yes?—had you anything to say?—I heard you were disturbed and anxious—I see you are troubled now—can I help you, Hester? It distressed me greatly to leave home without letting you know—but when you hear the circumstances, I am sure you will pardon”——

“Edgar! never mind,” I cried, unable to bear his explanation, “don’t speak of that—don’t—oh, pray don’t speak to me like this to-day!”

I put up my hand—I almost grasped his arm—but he—he only went to bring me a chair—to draw another for himself near me, and to take his place there with what seemed a painful but serious preparation for some renewal of our past contests. It was a significant action—we were to treat—to discuss—even to advise with each other, after a solemn and separate fashion; nothing violent or passionate was to come between us. But I, who had neither calmness nor moderation to bring to this interview, what was *I* to do? So many words came rushing to my lips that I could not find one reasonable enough and calm enough to say.

And glad to divert me from the personal subject, he took the initiative again. He looked at the papers in my hand—"Is it some business matter that troubles you, Hester—are these the cause of your distress?—will you show them to me?"

"By and bye," I said, "after—afterwards—first I have something else to say. Edgar!"

I want to tell you that I have been wrong all this time since ever we were married. I want you to know that I feel I have been wrong—very, very, miserably wrong. I want you to know; I cannot tell how you feel now, nor what is to happen to us—but I have been wrong—I want you to know.”

A violent colour came to his face, rising high to his very hair. He rose up from his seat and went away from me the whole length of the room, with hasty and agitated steps. As for me I rose also, and stood trembling and breathless, looking after him. I could say nothing more—my future was in his hands.

Then he came back, trying to be calm and self-possessed. “Hester,” he said, “you told me the same when you came home, but I do not see any difference it has made. We are no better than we were.”

I was growing sick, sick to the very heart—but it was not in my nature to throw myself at his feet. “Yes,” I exclaimed, “but it is

not my fault now—it is not *my* fault! Why do you leave everything to me?”

Once more he started, and made a desperate effort to be calm. He saw the crisis had come as well as I did, and like me had no moderation, no composure, to bring to it. He tried hard again to return to an indifferent subject, to put the passion and the earnestness away. “I will leave nothing to you, Hester, in which I can help you,” he said with a voice which faltered in spite of himself; “why do you agitate yourself and me with these vain discussions? you know very well that I shall thank you heartily for asking my assistance.”

“Yes!” I cried, “you thank me a great many times—you thank me always—you make everything bitter to me by your gratitude. Thanks, thanks! you should keep them for strangers. Why do you thank *me*?”


I had meant to humble myself—to the very dust if that was needful—and now in bitterness, feeling my repentance rejected, I was only falling into an angry despair instead,—but

the two things were not so different after all. He was roused at least,—at last—out of all further possibility of self-control. He paced about the room, keeping himself down, keeping back the words from his lips. Then he paused for an instant before me. “I thank you because you are kind,” he said abruptly; “because—do you think I am so blind that I cannot see all the pains you take for me? I know very well the efforts you make—am I wrong to thank you for that?”

“Kind!” what a word! I echoed it sharply, with a positive cry of pain and injury. I was *kind* to him! It was come to that.

He turned upon me sharply, too; he also exclaimed with impatience, “What can I say?—what would you have me to say? Other standing-ground seems lost between us—how am I speak to you? What do you want?”

I felt the air darkening round me as if I was about to faint; but, with a great effort, recovered myself. “I want to speak to you,” I said low and quick, with a feeling that it was



not me that spoke, but only my voice. "I have not rested since you left home. I have been waiting for you, longing for you, ever since you went away. I have something to say to you, Edgar! No—Oh, Harry, Harry, Harry!" I cried, carried on far before my thoughts by a passion not to be repressed, "it is not a stranger I have come to. I want to consult my husband. I want *you*, Harry,—you whom I have lost so long!"


I know he did not come to me at once, for the darkness gathered close, and I threw out my arms to support myself in that terrible, blind, falling faintness. I do not know what he did, nor what he said, nor how long a time it was before I came to myself. When I came to myself I was seated in his chair, trembling and shaken as if by some great convulsion, with Harry at my side, chafing my hands and kneeling down to look into my face. Was it all a dream? had we never been married? never been parted? I could not tell. There was a ringing in my ears, and my eyes were

dim—I saw nothing but him, close by me, and not even him distinctly, and what this new thing was which had happened to us I could not tell.

At this time I do not think I even knew that his heart was melted as well as mine; and whether our terrible life of separation was to end or to continue I did not ask, and could not tell. For myself, I sat quite still, trembling, exhausted, yet at ease, like one who has just past the crisis of a fever; and even when he spoke, I scarcely knew what words he said.

I came to understand them at last—he was praising me in the quick revulsion of his generous heart—he had been hard to win, hard to move—he had shut himself up as obstinately as I did at first—and now that it was all over, he was giving me the praise.

The praise! but I was humbled to the depths of my heart—I did not even feel it a mockery—I went back to my old, natural humbleness, and gave him all the merit for seeing any good in me. I bent my head before him



like a forgiven child. "Harry," I said, "Harry! is it all over?" When he caught my look, wistful and beseeching as I know it was, Harry's composure failed him as mine had done. He was as weak as me! as glad as me! as little able to receive it quietly—for it was all over!—all over! vanished like a dream.

"But you are right, Hester—I should not have left it to you—you have punished me nobly!" cried Harry; "had I done what you have done now, it might have been all over when you came home."

"This is best," I said, under my breath. I knew myself better than he did—I was glad of it all now—glad of everything—glad that I had been driven desperate, and compelled to put myself right at last. I kissed my husband's hand humbly and thanked God. I had been very wrong—I had nearly cast away my own life—nearly ruined his—nearly thrown aside the best and holiest influences from my boy; but God had saved

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me again and again on the very edge of the stream, and now I was delivered for ever. Yes, I might fall into other follies, other sins; but at once and for ever I was delivered from the power of this.

But as I withdrew my hand from Harry's, I remembered Saville's papers which were crushed together in my grasp; I started with an exclamation of pain when I saw them. Personal misfortune falling on her lover may do very well to awake into action the shy affections of a girl—but I could not bear to be supposed generous to my husband—I trembled lest he should think so; a violent heat and colour came to my face—I shut my hand again with an instinct of concealment. Another time! another time would surely do—I dared not disturb our new-found happiness so soon.

But Harry saw my sudden confusion, pain, and embarrassment. He took my hand again half anxiously, half playfully. "What are these?—what were you going to consult me

about—must I not be your adviser now, Hester?" he said with a smile. I put them away out of my hand upon the table with momentary terror. "Not now," I said eagerly, "not now; I got them from your enemy, Saville, *that* man—do not look at them now."

His face darkened, his brow knit—once more, once more! it was not such a look as women love to see upon the faces of their husbands, but it made him for the moment like my father, as I had once fancied him before. "So!" he said, "he has fulfilled his threat—the miserable rascal! he thought to involve my wife in it. Hester, is it because of these papers that you have come to me to day?"

"Oh, no, no—do not think it!" I cried, anxiously. "I am not escaped long enough from my own delusions to have no fear of them; do not fancy it was any secondary motive—do not, Harry! I could not bear the life we were living; and whenever I really had to speak to

you, all that was lying in my heart burst forth. It was so, indeed;—do not take up my sin where I leave it, Harry;—do not suspect me—oh, we have had enough of that!”

The tears were shining in his kind eyes I could see—he looked as he used to look in the brief charmed days before our marriage;—no, better than that—for through sorrow, and bitterness, and estrangement—strange lessons!—I knew him now, as then I had no chance to know him. “Do not fear, Hester,” he said; “I am not afraid of your generosity. I told you long ago I could bear to be pitied—the only thing I could not bear was *justice*;—and so long as what you give me is not barely my ‘rights,’ I will permit you to be as generous as even *your* nature can be. Now, Hester, at last may I speak of that long ago—that day when I came to Cottiswoode? and of the brave girl who brought me here, and her bit of briony? Not yet?—do you say not yet?”

“Harry, there are graver matters first,” I said; “there is a plot against you—they want

to say—*he* wants to say—that—that—you are only Brian Southcote's *heir*—you are not his son. I suppose he thought it would give me pleasure;—he told me—it is horrible! that Cottiswoode would be *mine*. Harry! think if this should be true, what a frightful punishment to me! I should never have believed it for a moment, had it not looked so just a penalty for all my sins against you. Tell me, Harry—say it is impossible that such a fatal mistake should be.”

The colour rose upon my husband's face, and he raised his head with an involuntary gesture of pride and defiance. It *was* a Southcote face! I could not be mistaken—all around were the portraits of our race, and I read them with a quick inspection as my anxious eye glanced from him for a moment. He was not like Edgar the Scholar now—My Harry could never have planned a demon's revenge upon unborn children—he was not like any one of them perhaps—but in his face I saw, as in a

glass, reflections, momentary glances, of all the pictured faces round us. And when I turned to gaze upon himself again, once more I was overwhelmed with that shadow of my father in his resolute expression. Oh, monstrous invention!—how could any one have found all these shadowy likenesses in the face of a stranger?

“Hester,” he said gravely, “when Saville came to me last winter with some vague threats of his power to prove me an impostor, I almost wished at first that I could have yielded to him and so restored to you the rights you were born to. But a man must be very wretched and debased indeed when he can make up his mind to deprive himself of his name. Do you remember that you forbade me telling you what he had come to say? I carefully went over then, both by myself and with my lawyer, the proofs which were thought conclusive at a former time. I found no reason to doubt them, Hester—there was neither break nor weakness in the

chain. You look at me doubtfully, wistfully—what do you wish me to say ?”

“That you are quite sure—quite sure,” I said—“I am speaking folly I know—but that you remember your father—that you are sure you are my uncle Brian’s son.”

“That is easily done—I am quite sure,” he said with perfect calmness; “but now, Hester, let me know what the fiction is. What does the fellow call me? I do not think his imagination is very brilliant—let me see.”

He took the papers—smoothed them out, and read them—at first with interest, then, as I thought, with surprise and amazement. “What does it mean,” he exclaimed, at last, turning to me, “I suppose you have the interpretation, Hester. What is all this about my poor little brother?—what does it mean?”

I made no answer, but only looked closely at him. As he caught my eye, the colour flushed to his face and he started

up, "Do you mean to say that he tries to identify me with my mother's eldest son," he cried with considerable excitement, "is this the story?—and her own letters—how are they pressed into the service?—is this what you have heard, Hester? Why do you not speak?—this is what you have heard!"

"Yes," I said, under my breath, feeling something like a culprit under his eye.

And Harry began to stride about the room, in considerable excitement, muttering words which I am afraid were not very commendatory of Saville. "The rascal!—the villain!—and only to deceive her—only to make my wife a party against me!" he exclaimed as he paced through the apartment—then gradually subduing himself, he came back and resumed his place by my side.

"If it were not that the results of his scheming have blessed me beyond my hopes, I am afraid I should lack power to restrain

myself," he said, "and all the more because this invention could only have been to deceive *you*, Hester, for it could not stand a moment's examination. I see what his abominable purpose was—to show to the world husband and wife contending with each other over this disputed inheritance. He must have trusted to your ignorance of the world—to your own truthful and open nature, which was beyond suspicion — and, good Heavens, Hester, think of it! to your hatred of me."

To the very depths of my heart I was humiliated; it was a palpable fraud then, a trick, which could only have been tried upon a credulous fool, a woman, or a child. My last eminence sank beneath my feet; I had no longer even discrimination enough to judge between the false and the true.

"Harry," I said faltering, "it may be only that I cannot bear you to think me so foolish; but I think indeed it might have deceived even a wiser person than me. I

was prepared to think it a lie, but it looked very like truth, Harry; indeed it is *difficult* to consent to it that I have been so very *easily* deceived."

"Ah, Hester, it all comes of our past circumstances," said my husband, "you were deceived because you did not know my story; shall I tell it to you now?"

I said "Yes," eagerly—then my eye caught the forsaken breakfast table, the poor kettle subsided into noiseless quietness, all its cheerful boiling over. "But you have had no breakfast!" I exclaimed. How Harry laughed, how his face shone, and the tears came to his eyes! Strange that it was always some simplest word that moved him most. He threw the papers down, and caught me in his kind arms, and rejoiced over me. These common things put him in mind of what had happened to us, of the life that lay before us now, the union that began to-day.

And when I began to arrange the breakfast

once more, to put the kettle on the fire, and ring for hot coffee, and arrange his neglected meal for him, he sat looking at me, not caring to do anything else, I thought—and it was strange what a pleasure I found in these housewifely matters. I believe when one comes to the very truth, when youth and its first romances are over, that there is no such pleasure for a woman as in these little domestic services, which are natural to her. How gladly and lightly I went about them! and my heart was full. I could not be content without the third little member of our family; I ran upstairs and brought down in my arms our beautiful boy. I think we were happy enough at that moment to make up for a whole year's trouble; and when Amy came into the room for baby, some time after, I saw her joyous, astonished glance from one to another, for Harry was dancing his son in his arms, and I was standing close by looking on, talking and clapping my hands to him. Amy did

not like to be inquisitive or "unmannerly," but in the simplicity of her heart she gave me such a wistful, questioning, delighted look when I put baby into her arms. Poor Amy! involuntarily I patted her stout shoulder with my hand as she went away, and I knew very well she went immediately to tell her tale of a new era to Alice—I saw it in her face.

And then Harry gathered up these scattered papers and drew my arm within his, and led me to the library; how strangely this room was connected with the principal events in my life! We went to the pretty recessed corner where my hours of girlish study used to be spent, and there my husband told me for the first time the story of his young life.

"I remember that I could once recollect my father, Hester," he said, "but I think that is all. My mother I remember well enough; and I have the most perfect recollection of the stone in memory of Brian

Southcote to which she used to lead me, and the little grave close by, where I have seen her prostrate herself in passionate sorrow, and where my little brother, Harry Southern, lay. This little brother fills up a great part of my earliest memory. He was a blight and shadow upon my life, though I was full of vague, childish sympathy and admiration for him. He had died just before my mother's second marriage, and when I was born I was named after him, and my mother's greatest desire seemed to be to make me a sort of shadow of her best-beloved child. I recollect quite well her frequent exclamation: 'Your father calls you Edgar, but you are Harry to me—always Harry to me—not my lost Harry, but, at least, his name—oh! I cannot give up his name.' I suppose I was precocious, as lonely children are so often; and I do not think I was quite satisfied even then to be only the reflection of another. However, that time was followed by a dismal one of friendlessness and solitude. And then a sailor brother of

the Savilles came by chance with his ship to Jamaica. My poor mother had been in regular correspondence with her cousin, Miss Saville, and the brother was commissioned to find me out—I came home to England with him; all that my father had left in Jamaica had got into very uncertain hands by that time, and, though the amount sounded well, it was, I am afraid, only a fabulous inheritance, and I was a very poor child indeed when our good Rector here, then a poor curate, took me in, and gave me shelter. I owed everything to their kindness, Hester—they were humble people, and I had ‘no claim upon them’ as people say—but they were angels of charity to me.

“A year or two after I came to England, the attorney brother came down from London to visit them. He was not then what he is now—he was unscrupulous, and not very respectable perhaps, but he had a good deal of acuteness, and was prudent enough to restrain his evil appetites. In mere idleness at first, he began

investigating who I belonged to, as he called it. There had been a rumour in the family that my poor mother had made a great match; and Saville soon discovered what his simple relatives never could have discovered, who Brian Southcote was, and what his heir was entitled to. My father had been a man of foolish benevolence—he had taken no precautions for me—done nothing that he could help—so that it required no small research, and perseverance and industry, to get proofs of my identity together. I always disliked the man, but I was indebted to him; and during the whole time of my minority he restricted my means greatly. Then when I came of age I pensioned him—but he has not been satisfied with this; he has gradually fallen in character, and habits, into the miserable reprobate who is nothing but disgrace to his kind kindred who will not disown him. I have been obliged to resist his exactions again and again—and after he threatened me, of course my honour was concerned, and I could not permit myself to

be bullied into further concessions. These letters you see are addressed to Miss Saville—are you able to go to the rectory with me, Hester, and hear her account of her cousin's children? and we will see this man together. The facts are very simple, plausible as this fiction is; but Harry Southern was five or six years old before my father's marriage—did not that occur to you, my timid wife?"

"Yes—yes," I said eagerly; "a great many things occurred to me—I felt almost sure that the first of these letters referred to an older child than the others; but I had no clue—nothing to guide me, and the thought that it *might* be true was enough to make me miserable. I am quite able—I promised to let him know what I would do—come, come, let us go at once, Harry."

He smiled at my eagerness now, but went first to his desk, unlocked it, and a concealed drawer in it, and drew from thence a little bundle of papers; one was a certificate of his parents' marriage, the other of the birth of

Harry Edgar Southcote; and other corroborative documents. I returned them to him hastily. I was almost offended; "Why do you offer me these," I said, impatiently, "is your word not enough for me?" "You must consider what is enough for law and the world, Hester," said my husband; "enough to secure to our boy an unblemished name—he is the principal person to be considered in this argument; though there is no fear of his inheritance between us, we must take care to establish his perfect right to be called Southcote. My family pride is all of your teaching—but I have caught it fully now. Shall you get ready then? Ah, Hester, is all this nightmare that is past only a dream?"

"Only a dream, Harry, only a dream!" I cried, as we stood together hand in hand; so much a dream that I scarcely could suppose now how it had been with us yesterday—and when at last I left him to get my bonnet, I ran upstairs almost with a lighter foot than Flora's; the cloud was gone—gone

—absolutely gone ; and instead of being sceptical of my own happiness, it was the misery now that I was sceptical of—I could scarcely believe it, scarcely understand how I could have defied and rejected all these blessings of Providence so long.

When I went into my room, Alice was there, looking excited, heated, full of anxiety and trouble. How hastily she tied the ribbons of baby's cloak, and sent Amy away with him ! how impatient she looked while I bent over him, and kissed the sweet face which brightened every day into more beautiful intelligence ! Then she waited to know what I wanted, and when I told her what it was, she came behind me, arranging my cloak upon my shoulders with tremulous hands—and I caught a glimpse of her wistful agitated face looking at me in the glass, trying to read in my eyes what had happened to me. As she did this, I turned round upon her suddenly, and looked full in her face ; she faltered, retired a little, and I saw was

almost crying with extreme agitation and anxiety. I took both her hands and drew her very close to me.

"Alice, can you believe it," said I, "God has cured me by great blessings, and not by great calamities, as you once feared He would. It is all over—it is all over, there will never be any more misery in this house. Have you been praying for it, Alice? Is it through you?"

"Oh, my darling, my precious child," cried Alice, suddenly clasping me in her arms as if I had been a child indeed; "it's through His mercy! I'd be glad to die now!"

"Hush, hush, hush! there would be little joy then," said I, when I was able to draw myself from her arms, "we are all to be very happy now, Alice, like a fairy tale."

"Like them that love God," said Alice solemnly.

I bowed my head; these words overpowered me. Was it He who had guided me through all those dark and wilful ways? He who had

filled me with the fruit of my own doings ; given me my own will, till I knew what a miserable inheritance that was ? He who had saved my baby ; at whose feet I had prostrated myself, vowing to sacrifice the sin which I regarded in my heart ? I bent my head into my hands and wept. I think every tear was a thanksgiving, for they relieved my heart.

That rectory lane ! how dull it used to be—how full of beautiful life it was to-day. We did not look much as if we were going about a serious piece of business—we were so occupied and absorbed with ourselves—and it never once occurred to me what should be said to Saville till we were entering at the rectory gate. On the road my husband told me—a very strange coincidence too—that the stranger who accompanied him last night, and for whom he had left a message, had sought him out about the lost West Indian property, which still might be recovered. When we came at last to the rectory, I asked “What will you say to Saville, Harry ?” but there was no time

to answer my question. Miss Saville met us in the hall—she looked disturbed, alarmed, anxious—she knew our visit must have some reference to my yesterday's conference with her brother, and she was very anxious for him. I ran to her eagerly, took her hand, and kissed her. I was very little given to this species of affectionateness, and she was completely taken by surprise. "Mrs Southcote, my dear, what is it?" she said, sinking down upon one of the stiff hall chairs, and doing what she could to keep herself from crying. "Hester never knew before how much I owed to you," said Harry, coming to my help, for indeed I was nothing loth to cry too! "Come, dear friend, we want your kind assistance. Where is the Rector—and Richard—but, Miss Saville, let us first speak to you."

She led the way into a little housekeeping parlour, which was her own special sanctuary, and there sat down trembling to hear what we had to say. Then Harry told her the

entire story ; she was grievously distressed. She could not bear to blame her brother, yet the way in which he had taken advantage of her wounded her to the heart. "*My letters !*" she said faintly—"Dear boy, dear Harry, you don't think *I* ever meant to do harm to you ? He made me give him poor Maria's letters to amuse him, he said—he's got them all—can they do you any harm ? can they ?—tell me !—for he's got them all."

"They can do me no harm—they have done me the greatest good," said Harry, "they have restored to me my wife ; but I must see him in your presence, and have this matter set at rest. He must be mad to think of injuring me by such an expedient as this."

"Hush ! I sometimes think," said Miss Saville, under her breath, "that it is telling on his mind—I do, indeed. He raves of nights ; and whatever William and I can say, he won't give up that dreadful drinking ; he'll kill him-

self, Harry dear—that's what he'll do—and such a man as he was once—oh, such a man as he might have been!"

And tears of love and anguish—love, most undeserved, most long-suffering—fell slowly and bitterly from this good woman's eyes. I had scorned her once, but I felt very poor and mean beside her now.

When she had sufficiently composed herself, she took us into another room, and left us to bring her brothers. The Rector came immediately, the other refused. Miss Saville returned in great distress to say that he would not come—that he refused to see us—that I had broken faith with him.

"We must go to him, then," said my husband, steadily; "the Rector will give you his arm, Hester. Do not be nervous, Miss Saville—this must be settled—but he shall be spared, be sure. Come, lean upon me—my kind, old friend, can you not trust me?"

"Oh, yes, yes!" she said, but her distress was so great and evident that I scarcely could bear

it. We went in this solemn order—the Rector, in great perturbation, giving me his arm, but looking afraid of me, to the study. Saville was sitting smoking by the fire—he started up, and dashed his cigar to the ground as we entered—he turned fiercely round upon us like a wild beast at bay, and asked, with an oath, what was the meaning of this—was he never to be left alone?

“Yes, in half an hour,” said my husband; “but first I must speak to you. Saville, you have been a very good friend to me—I acknowledge it—you know I have always been glad to say as much. What motive could you have to tell this false story—this story you know so well to be false—to my wife?”

“Motive?—I had motive enough, you may be sure,” answered Saville, shortly—“that is my concern—it is your’s to prove the story false, as you call it—false! what do you know about it—there’s not a man qualified to speak on the subject but me.”

“Oh! Richard! Richard!” cried Miss

Saville; "poor Maria's letters—was that the use you wanted to make of them? But you know very well it is not true. William and I know it is not true; and to tell it to his wife—oh, for shame, for shame!"

"Give me back the papers," said the man, hoarsely, holding out his hand to me.

I was surprised to see Harry take them out at once and hand them to him. *I* would have kept possession of them, for they were still important and dangerous to me.

He held them in his hands a moment as if undecided, and then tossed them on the table, where they fluttered about like scraps of useless paper, as they were. "I thought you had a serpent in your house," he said, looking at Harry—"I owed her a grudge as well as you; but if you are in league, I had as well give up the contest. I'll tell you what—give me cash enough to take me somewhere—America—Australia—I don't care where it is. I don't want to see one of you again, and you'll be rid of me."

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Miss Saville started as if about to speak, but restrained herself—glanced at her better brother, and closed her eyes, growing very pale; bad as he was, she could not bear the thought of an everlasting parting—he was her brother still.

“I will do this,” said Harry, quietly, “but it must not be done so that your perverse ingenuity can make it look like a bribe. Will you come to Cottiswoode to-morrow? the Rector will come with you—come as a man should come who dares look other men in the face—on my part, I will have a friend fit to cope with you, and settle this business once and for ever;—do you consent?”

He did not speak for a moment—he was hemmed in and saw no way of escape; he searched about with his cunning eyes in the vacant air, but saw no expedient. “I consent!” he said, sullenly, “anything for peace. Leave me alone, for heaven’s sake—there, there, Martha, take your remonstrances away!”

We left him so—and Harry did not even

take the trouble of gathering up these pieces of paper. "They are quite harmless, Hester," he said to me with a smile when I spoke of them, and I was obliged to be satisfied with that.

Then we went into Miss Saville's little parlour again—the Rector and she were consulting anxiously together. The Rector was sadly clouded and cast down—he was a good man, but he was weaker than his sister.

"Yes, it is much better I should go," she said; "I will go with Richard. Mr Southcote—Harry!—if you are to have a stranger present let *me* come instead of the Rector—it might be awkward for William—he might meet the gentleman again; and consider he is a clergyman, and must not do anything unbecoming his station. I will come with poor Richard—it will do as well, will it not?"

"Quite as well," said my husband; "better indeed, except that it will grieve you."

"It will not grieve me so much as it

would grieve William," she said quickly; and that point was settled.

"Dear Miss Saville, it is through me this distress has come upon you," I said, as she went out with us to the door. I looked up to her anxiously, now that I had come to esteem her so much. I was afraid she must think very little of me.

"My dear, it will be all settled through you," said Miss Saville, "and that will be a blessing—I am glad it has come to this—very glad in my spirit, though it's hard to the flesh. William will have peace at last!"

She went in abruptly as we left the door; she could not keep her composure any longer. With a woman's sympathetic instinct, I knew she was gone away with her burden, to try if she could lighten it by tears.

"Harry," I said gravely, when we went away, "she is not young, nor pretty, nor clever, nor interesting—people don't love her even when they only see her as I used to do.

What has such a woman to reward her for the neglects and slights that are her portion now?"

"Patience and hope here, nothing more, Hester," said Harry; "not even William loves her as she loves him—nothing but hope and patience—poor Martha!—and in the world to come, life everlasting. That is enough for her."

Enough for any one, surely, surely!—but God had made a difference between her life and ours.

ANOTHER DAY.

It was little Harry's birth-day.

He was standing before me in the little fanciful dress of blue velvet which Alice and Amy, no less than myself, thought so particularly becoming to his beautiful complexion, and in which he had already made a grand appearance, and stood at full length in a wonderful gilt frame, upon the wall of the dining-room down-stairs, for the admiration of all the visitors at Cottiswoode, and the instruction of future ages. I was seated in the nursery proper, a large room, which communicated with my dressing-room, with "something else" upon my knee—something which was a maze of fine muslin, of lace, and embroidery, almost richer, if that were possible, than Harry's baby robes

had been—and of which the only legible token of humanity was a pair of blue eyes shining through the maze of the pretty veil; blue eyes, the “sweetest eyes that e’er were seen” to my husband and to me.

I had been so very anxious about this little one—so overwhelmed with superstitious awe and terror lest this should be the fated second boy the inheritor of that weird and ghostly jewel; but I was suffering Harry now to turn round and round upon my finger the hereditary diamond. Thus far, at least, the spell was broken. The blue eyes belonged to a little girl— a little Helen Ennerdale, a sweet representative of her whose sweet and peaceful face was always with me. I feared my ring no longer. I had even placed it sportively on baby’s little finger, and promised Alice in the lightness of my heart that this was the woman, the Southcote born, from whose finger this pledge of family misfortune was to fall.

For I was now a happy young matron—a

thrice happy mother; yes, Mr Osborne was right—I was a girl at heart—I grew younger every day. Since my little girl was born, Alice herself, who would not have thought the crown jewels too fine for me, had looked on with amazement at the additions which I made to my wardrobe. The love of all these pretty things—the feminine pleasure in them, for their own sake—had grown and blossomed in me ever since I became a happy wife. Do you say that was no very great result to have arrived at? No, neither it was, if it had been a result, but it was only an indication. I was no longer indifferent to anything—I had a liking, a choice, an opinion, in every daily matter of my life. I lived these bright days heartily, caring for everything, doing everything with a will—my heart was no longer dwelling abstracted in some course of private thoughts, of recollections or broodings. My heart was in my work and in my pleasure, and had to do with all I was engaged in. All those blessings that came fresh

to me from God's hands—should I have taken them grudgingly? No, I received them with all my heart.

It was Harry's birthday—he was three years old; and we were just about setting out with his little sister to the church, to add her to the number of those on whom the name of the Lord is named. Alice, in the silk gown she had worn at my marriage, was standing by me, ready to carry the little neophyte downstairs, while Amy waited behind with her bright good-humoured face and holiday dress, to follow in our train. It was a beautiful day of June, warm and sunny, the windows were open, the sweet air, rich with the breath of flowers, blew from window to window, stirring the veil about this sweet new face. There were flowers everywhere, sweet bouquets of roses—it was a double holiday, a day of family joy. I could not have the house sufficiently bright nor sufficiently adorned.

And there was Harry—the elder Harry—looking in at the door, making a pretence of

chiding us for delay, but, in reality, looking at the group which belonged to him, with joy which was too great for words. And then we set out in our joyful solemn procession, Alice going first that we might not lose sight of the young newcomer. My pretty Flora, now quite an experienced young wife, was standing beside Miss Saville, waiting for us downstairs—these were to be my little Helen's godmothers ; the one a beautiful, happy young woman, rich in all the gifts of this world ; the other, drawing near the frost of age—homely, stiff, ceremonious, noways beautiful. What a strange contrast they were ! but I would rather have been without Flora than without my husband's kindest friend.

Mr Osborne, who was also with us, gave his arm to Flora—like other people, he preferred the youthful beauty to the elderly goodness—Miss Saville came with Harry and me. As we went down the lane she talked to us of our duties ; how we should educate our children ; and of the system of religious

instruction she should think it her duty to adopt with baby when she was old enough; while little Harry looked up with amazement from my side, and privately whispered to me to ask if Miss Saville was scolding papa and mamma. Harry did not comprehend how the infallible authorities of his little world should be lectured by anybody, and varied between amazement and indignation. We, for our own parts, took it with great good humour and respect, though, perhaps, it did not do us much good—for Miss Saville belonged to a bygone age, and to a class which greatly abounds in system—though I by no means despised her counsels and wisdom in training the little heir of Cottiswoode, who, long ago, had shown unmistakeable signs of possessing “a will of his own.”

How beautiful the day was!—those glorious measureless depths of blue, yon floating snow-white islands—were they clouds or sunshine?—that curdled broken line, in its long oblique streaks, a vague beatitude of light and vapour,

a real milky way. Then the green borders of the lane, with its tiny eyes of flowers looking through the matted herbage; the clear little rivulet of water singing through the meadow; the willows rustling their long branches as though vainly longing for the water, which these bristling boughs will never reach—I had the spring of returning strength, of added blessings—everything to be thankful for. I felt as if every step I took was somehow an expression of thankfulness. I was in no mood to listen to any discourse—my thoughts were all abroad upon the fresh air and sunshine, my heart was singing its own quiet song of jubilee and gratitude—I am afraid all the lectures in the world would have been lost on me.

And then we clustered round the humble font, in the homely little country church, many a kindly looker-on from the village following us softly, on tiptoe, to see the ceremony—that ordinance of all others most touching, most solemn, most simple, most like the

first instinctive wish of nature. To claim by name and sign the protection of God for this little child, to lay down her helplessness, visibly in the sight of men, at the feet of the only strength that is Omnipotent, the only love that is Almighty; to say aloud before our neighbours "She belongs to us only because she belongs to Thee—she shall be ours for ever, living or dying, because she and we are Thine." I leaned heavily upon my husband's arm, and looked up into his face. Harry's eyes were wet and glistening as mine were—we had not been together when our eldest born was dedicated thus, and it had been a hard, sad day to me—but the joy of this was almost more than I could bear.

When we left the church it was not in the nature of mortal woman to help lingering to hear the plaudits which the admiring mothers of Cottisbourne bestowed upon my little Helen; some of them remembered my mother, and prophesied that this was to be "her very image"—others, loyal to the reigning monarchs,

were divided as to whether she should be like her father or her mother—but there was no doubt about the principal fact, that such a beautiful baby never was seen. Little Harry by this time had deserted me for Amy, and the rest of the party had gone on before, so that I had only the Rector for my companion—the Rector, who, good man, had lingered with his natural ceremonious politeness, waiting for me. Mr Saville was not great at conversation—and after we had exchanged a few remarks about the village and the parish, and the work which he was doing in both, I was much surprised when he, of his own accord, began another subject—

“We have heard from my brother in Australia to-day, Mrs Southcote,” he said; “Miss Saville is somewhat agitated—did you not observe it?”

“No, indeed,” I said. “Is it painful news?—oh, I hope not!—or we only have been troubling her to-day.”

“The trouble is an honour, Madam,” said my

reverend companion, with one of his elaborate bows; "and the news is—not painful, certainly. My brother Richard, though unfortunate, was a man of mind—always a man of mind, Mrs Southcote—and has, I am glad to say, recovered himself in his new sphere, as we are led to hope,—he has, indeed," and here the Rector sighed a small sigh—"married since he went abroad—and with Mr Southcote's liberal allowance I have no doubt he will do well."

And again the excellent Rector sighed. Why did the good man sigh? "You do not disapprove of his marriage; Mr Saville?" said I, in my ignorance.

"Disapprove! no—far be it from me to disapprove of an honourable estate," said the Rector, looking wistfully up at the windows of the Rectory as we passed. "I have no doubt if Richard is mercifully supported in his changed ways he will be a happy man;—but there are many men who never have it in their power to consult their own inclinations, Mrs Southcote," he continued, with a sentimental air, shaking

his head slightly, and looking after his sister, who was walking before us. I could not help blushing, though I was very much inclined to laugh—and I hurried on immediately to rejoin my husband, for I was afraid that the Rector was about to make a confidante of me.

The good man looked disappointed, but succumbed into his usual grim politeness, as I hastened on and took Harry's arm. My heart smote me when I saw his blank look, but I could not bear, knowing what a good man he was, to see him look ridiculous; and I am very much afraid that the Rector's love-sorrows would have been little else to me.

Harry was in great glee and most exuberant spirits. "What do you think, Hester?" he cried, in a half-whisper, whenever we were sufficiently far apart from our companions—"the Rector's going to be married—there's news for you — what do you think of that?"

"I am sure there is nothing at all laughable in it, Harry," said I, taking the opportunity,

gladly, to resent my own strong inclination to laughter upon him.

Harry did not cease for my reproof, but his laugh was inward and subterraneous. "We must have the thing done in grand style," he said, "and astonish the bashful bridegroom by the reception we give him. Did they tell you the Ethiopian had changed his skin, Hester?—that Richard had 'settled?' I suppose I ought to be glad to believe it—but I have no faith in that fellow. And now what can we do for Martha,—my kindest friend?—not that I don't thank you, with all my heart, Hester, for what you have done already—she will never forget the honour you have given her to-day."

"I know exactly what we must do for her, Harry," said I.

"Do you?" he said, looking down upon me affectionately; "since when have you turned a good fairy, my rebellious wife?"

"Hush, Harry!" I said. "If I had not been your rebellious wife and very miserable once, I don't think I ever should have been good."

for anything; but I know quite well what we must do for Miss Saville to make her quite happy; you must see about building her a pretty, large, roomy cottage near Cottisbourne immediately, Harry."

"Must I?" said my obedient husband, "and pray, Mrs Hester, if one might ask a reason—why?"

"Because it was her own project, her own desire—and it was in my black time," I said sadly. "I will tell you all about it after—but that is what you must do."

"When was your black time, Hester?" said Harry. "Was it when you and all the world were in mourning—when you found out that you had been deceived?"

"Don't, don't! I can't bear you to speak so," I cried. "It never was your fault,—never, Harry!—Why must I not speak?—what, *you* will not hear me? you are a tyrant, sir!"

"Very well," said Harry, laughing, "so be it—we will not quarrel over whose fault it was; but we know by whose blessing it is a white

time now," he added more gravely, "and your orders shall be obeyed, though I will not call you a tyrant. I shall be glad to have Martha Saville still near us, and I think now it would be rather a heartbreak for her to part from these children and you."

He was quite right, though I wondered at it—Miss Saville had indeed grown fond of me. That she should love little Harry was nothing wonderful, but I was both proud and amazed at her affection for me.

We were to have a good many people with us that evening, and when Harry went up to the nursery with me to see the children, and how baby looked after her churchgoing, I started so much that I almost let my little Helen fall from my arms, when I drew off my glove—"My ring—my ring! what has become of it? I am sure I had it on my finger when I went out," I cried. "Alice did you see it? I must have drawn it off with my glove."

Amy, Alice, the two Harries, great and

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little were immediately scattering for it is very windy. I was not to be found. "Is it your father's ring, is it not?" said my husband. "You have found it in the church, have you? I shall walk home immediately, and we will be merry—I cannot be sure—my wife will find it when she knows it for yours."

"Oh, Harry, said I, not merry," I cried eagerly; "what a little there is of me here—pray don't go to it all, then—I do not care—I shall be very glad if it is lost."

"What do you mean, Hester?" he cried in amazement.

I took him aside and whispered all the story into his ear; but Harry was sceptical, and laughed at my superstition. "Why, then, the ring is not yours, Hester," he said, laughing, "but your second son's—and you have no right to lose other people's property so coolly. Never fear, we will exorcise the demon—and, even on your own showing, it is better to look after it, than the mysterious

powers who have it in charge may know you were unwilling to lose it. Now, let me go."

I was obliged to let him go; though very reluctantly—and, when he went away, Flora came running up stairs to condole with me. "Oh, Hester, have you lost your beautiful ring?" cried Flora; "and do you know Mr Southcote is laughing about it, and says you do not want to find it again; tell me the story—do tell me the story, Hester! Mr Osborne has gone with him, and the Rector and Miss Saville are in very earnest conversation, and I want my little goddaughter—oh, Hester, I do so wish you would give her to me!"

Yes, Flora was very envious; so we permitted her to hold the young lady in her arms, while Alice told her the story of Edgar the Scholar, and his revenge. Flora was very much awed by it, and full of eager interest now for the return of Harry; "She hoped—

she did so hope, that he would never find that dreadful ring!—she should be quite frightened to look at it again!”

For my part, I was also a little anxious about it; but Harry's good example, and my own light heart, brought me out of the power of the supernatural. I knew already that love and peace reigned at Cottiswoode — that my own sins, my mother's wrongs, the lifelong sin and punishment of my father, had found a merciful conclusion in the happy family life which once more consecrated with daily thanksgiving the ancient family home. The constant feuds between the elder and the younger had merged in the perfect union of the two branches of our house. God and Providence were with us, and we could afford to smile at Mystery and Fate.

But the ring was not to be found; though it was sought for in every direction, rewards offered, and every means tried—for Harry

was obstinate in his endeavours to recover it—the ring of Edgar the Scholar never returned to Cottiswoode. I do not mean to confess that I am still superstitious about it—for, of course, such a jewel as that was no small prize, and some stranger might have picked it up upon the road, and I have no doubt did—yet it was very strange, it must be admitted, that it should disappear so. We have not only a second son now, but a third, and a fourth! and Cottiswoode is almost overflowing, and our patrimonial acres will have enough to do to provide for all the children with whom God has blessed us. Sorrow has been in our house—sickness—once death,—but strife has never entered at the peaceful doors of Cottiswoode; and I should smile now, with the smile of perfect confidence and security, did any one whisper to me that discord could come between Harry and his brave brother Brian, our little knight-errant—our St George—our eager champion of the distressed. The

children are God's children—I do not tremble for them: and Life comes to have a very different aspect, with all its unknown haps and chances, when one can say Providence, heartily, instead of Fate.

THE END.



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